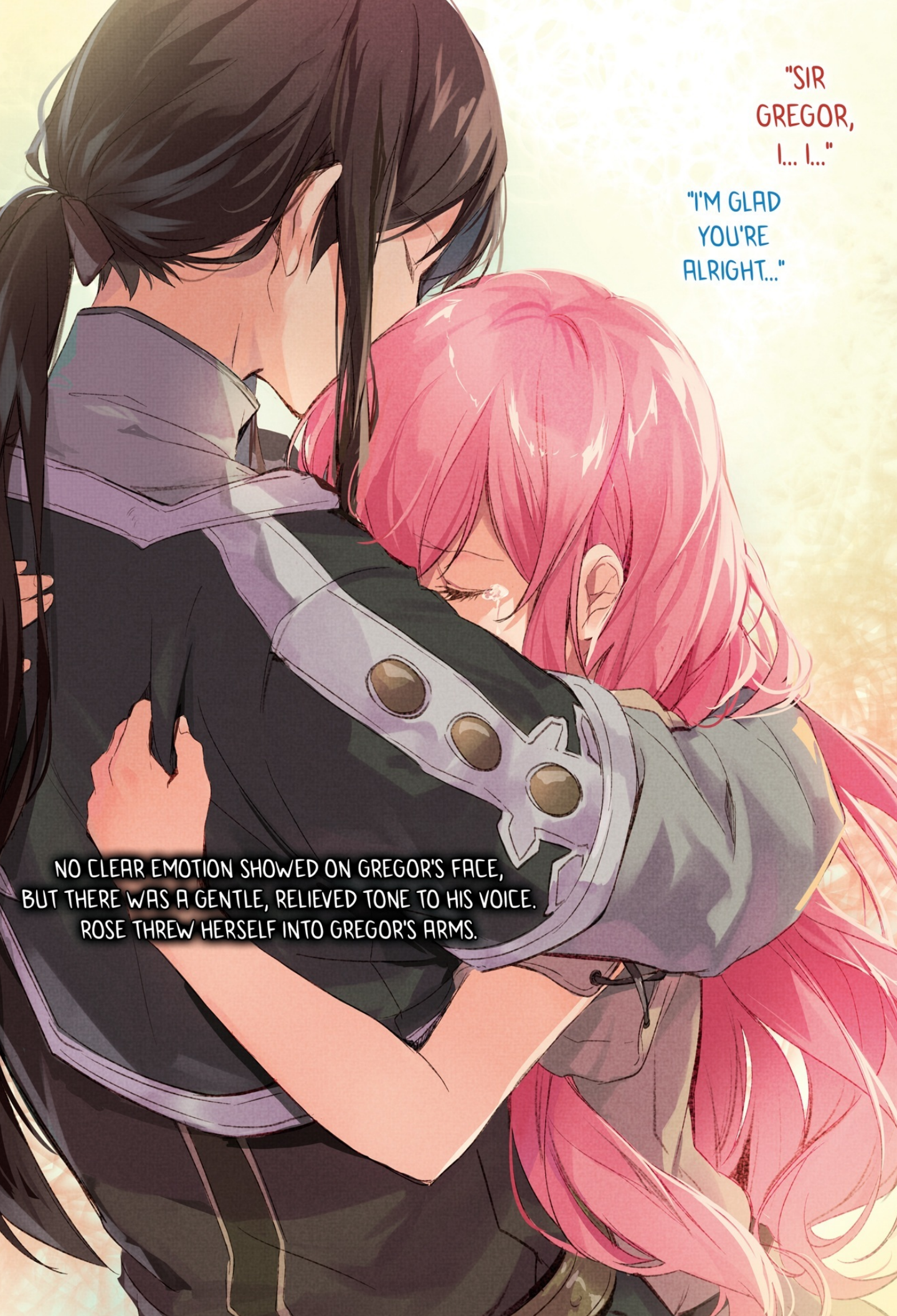
If It's for My Daughter, I'd Even Defeat a Demon Lord 3

CHIROLU
Illustrator: Kei

"SO THIS IS THE 'LITTLE MAGIC USER,' HUH? SHE SURE IS A LOVELY LITTLE GIRL, JUST LIKE YOU SAID."
"LATINA ISN'T LITTLE,"
RESPONDED LATINA, PUFFING UP HER CHEEKS A BIT IN DISPLEASURE.

"RIGHT? YOU DON'T GET TO PLAY WITH SUCH EXCELLENT PRODUCTS VERY OFTEN."
WHILE CHLOE AND SYLVIA CHATTERED AWAY, ENJOYING THEMSELVES GREATLY, MORE AND MORE THINGS WERE SMEARED ACROSS LATINA'S FACE. LATINA WAS ALSO IN THE MIDST OF HAVING HER MAKEUP DONE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HER LIFE.
"HEHEHE... CHLOE, THIS IS PRETTY FUN, ISN'T IT?"


"SIR GREGOR, I... I..."
"I'M GLAD YOU'RE ALRIGHT..."
NO CLEAR EMOTION SHOWED ON GREGOR'S FACE, BUT THERE WAS A GENTLE, RELIEVED TONE TO HIS VOICE. ROSE THREW HERSELF INTO GREGOR'S ARMS.

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1: The Young Girl Returns to Kreuz

After departing from the village of Tislow, Dale and Latina made it back to Kreuz right on schedule, when it was shifting from the start of summer into summer proper.

The instant the Dancing Ocelot came into view, Latina handed Blau's reins to Dale and went running. She was all smiles as she passed through the entrance to the shop and shouted, loudly and clearly, "We're back!"

Rita, who was handling paperwork in her usual spot, suddenly stopped and looked up. After confirming the source of the voice, she broke out in a smile of both joy and surprise.

"Latina."

"We're back, Rita!"

"Welcome home."

When Latina heard those words, she looked even happier. Apparently, there was still a level above being "all smiles."

"Um, um, we brought back lots of souvenirs."

"That's certainly exciting. By the way, where's Dale?"

"Huh...?"

Calming down a little when she heard Rita's question, Latina tilted her head and then turned back around. He should've been right behind her, but he wasn't there. "Huh?"

"What's this about me?" Perhaps having heard their exchange, Dale responded from the kitchen on the other side of the counter. Since he couldn't take Blau into the shop, he had circled around back.

Terribly flustered, Latina hurried into the kitchen. Kenneth was there, preparing food like always. He had been talking to Dale, but when he noticed Latina, he pointed a smile her way. "So you're back, huh? Welcome home!"

"Ah!" With two quick hops, she faced Kenneth, looking slightly disappointed, and said, "I'm back, Kenneth."

Kenneth couldn't help but tilt his head at this. He couldn't figure out why she'd feel dejected. "What's wrong?"

"Latina thought she'd be the first one to say 'We're back' to Rita and

Kenneth, but Dale got to you first...”

“How thoughtless of him.”

“So I’m in the wrong?”

“Are you saying Latina is, then?”

“Of course the responsibility is fully on me, for having stolen away Latina’s enjoyment.”

“You never change, do you?”

Seeing Dale acting the same as always, Kenneth broke out in an awkward smile and took a break from his work. He then patted Latina on her head like he frequently did, noting that her hair was done up with a ribbon that had a rather elaborate design.

“I’m just glad to see you’re safe. Welcome home, Latina.”

Hearing those words repeated, Latina regained her smile.

After returning to the shop front, Latina stopped and stared at Rita in amazement. “Rita, your stomach’s so big!”

It was hard to tell when she was sitting on the other side of the counter like she always did, but Rita now had an obvious, big belly compared to when they left on the trip and it had just barely started showing.

“You can feel the baby moving around in there, now.”

“Wow, the baby... it’s amazing!”

Latina excitedly, gently touched Rita’s stomach, then looked up with a serious expression on her face, seemingly having realized something. “If your belly’s this big, then... isn’t it heavy?”

“It is. My hips and my back and stuff hurt, and it’s awful.”

“Should Latina cast healing magic?”

“Now that you’re back, I can ask you to do that, huh?”

It wouldn’t make sense to call on a professional magic user to cast healing magic just to deal with hip and back pain. But fortunately, it was easy to ask this kind young girl to do so, even if it was hard to request the same of an adult.

“Did you have fun on your trip?”

“Yeah! A lot happened that Latina couldn’t write in her letters.”

Dale faced Latina, who was about to launch into tales of their travels, and with an uneasy smile, butted into the conversation. “How about changing first, Latina? And we need to dump our luggage, too.”

“Right.”

The adults watched with peaceful expressions as Latina turned around and headed through the kitchen.

“Latina sure is energetic, isn’t she?”

“She’s all worked up. It was her first long trip.”

“I’m just relieved we made it through without any big injuries or illnesses.” The relief in Dale’s voice as he reported their safe return was palpable. “You seem to be doing alright, Rita.”

“It’s our first, so there’s a lot I don’t know.”

“Her dad’s been helping handle the Akhdar’s Message Board. It’d be hard for me to manage that at the same time as the kitchen.”

When Rita got married, her parents entrusted the shop to the newly married couple and went into retirement in the residential part of the southern district. But when it came to the work in the Dancing Ocelot, there were only a limited number of people who could use the Akhdar’s Message Board, since doing so required the temple’s permission. It could be said that it required a license, in a way. As a result, they also couldn’t just hire a temporary employee. That’s why the previous shop owner, Rita’s father, had started diligently helping out for the sake of his daughter and grandchild.

“Have you been alright, Kenneth?”

“I’m a perfectly capable adult, so I’ve been fine. I’ve wished that Latina was here plenty of times, though.”

The adorable young girl’s ability to calm those around her was already something of a special skill. Kenneth may have been recognized by Rita’s father as the husband of his only daughter, but it wasn’t as if the relationship between the two of them was perfect. There wasn’t active discord between them, but they did end up clashing when they were together. That was also part of why her parents had gone into retirement.

“Is my dad really that scary?”

“...”

“He’s not scary to me. To me, at least...”

The man had run a shop for rowdy adventurers for many years, never budging an inch. Kenneth and Dale couldn’t help but exchange an awkward glance.

With the pitter-patter of her light yet hurried footsteps, they realized that Latina had returned. In no time at all, she popped on in, having changed out her traveling gear for one of her usual dresses.

“Dale, Latina will handle the laundry, so just leave your clothes out.”

“Right.”

One could surmise from the natural flow of this conversation that it had been

completely established that Latina was now handling most of the housework. She had been a hard worker even before the trip, but after these few months of studying under Dale's mother Magda while staying in Tislow, she'd thoroughly polished her skills. That was the exact opposite of Dale, who had distanced himself from such chores while back in his old home. Thanks to how things had proceeded from then on, Dale still hadn't realized that he was depending on Latina for the majority of the housework.

"Seems like you've gotten even more reliable, Latina..." Rita muttered without thinking.

Latina was now cheerfully laying out bags on the counter in front of Rita and Kenneth. She went ahead and did this because she knew this was a slow time for the Ocelot.

"This is a souvenir for you, Rita," Latina said, pulling an amulet that was the right size to be held in one of her hands out of her bag. It was made of a complex weave of string, but had a simple feel to it.

"Is that... an amulet of Quirmizi?"

"Oh, my. Thank you, Latina."

Quirmizi was the god of the harvest and also the one you prayed to for safe births and the prosperity of your descendents. Pregnant women and the people around them often sought such amulets.

"Did you make this...?" Kenneth asked Dale with a sigh, only for him to look away in embarrassment.

"Latina said she wanted to give Rita an amulet, and I am technically a priest, so..."

"I see." Kenneth kept his response short and his expression gentle, knowing Dale wasn't overly fond of his divine protection.

†

This occurred when Dale and Latina were halfway through their stay in Tislow.

"Right! There's a baby in Rita's belly," Latina said to Granny Wen, telling her about things back in Kreuz while reading a book she had borrowed from Master Cornelio.

"I see. Then perhaps you should create an amulet of Quirmizi for her."

"An amulet? You mean a charm? Latina can make one?"

"Only priests, those with divine protection, can make them. But you can

create the decorative part that surrounds it. Just leave the inside to that stupid grandson of mine."

"Dale?"

"Right. Even he can manage that much of a priestly task."

As Dale didn't normally have even a shred of priestliness to him, Latina tilted her head at this statement. Seeing this, Granny Wen let out a hearty laugh. Dale wasn't overly fond of his divine protection, so he tended not to mention it too often. Even so, he'd had enough techniques beaten into him to handle basic priestly tasks. And it was none other than Wendelgard herself, the current highest-ranking priest in Tislow, who had trained him.

The land of Tislow was blessed so deeply by the gods that the whole of the village could be called a temple. The culture and customs they inherited from their ancestors were based in a deep faith. In this land, where so many people were born with divine protection, the basic practices of the temple weren't treated as anything special, and were instead made a part of everyday customs.

Latina knew nothing of those unique circumstances surrounding Tislow, but she was an obedient young girl, so that night she talked to Dale about making an amulet when they were all alone in their room, just as Granny Wen had told her to do.

"Granny said that?"

"Yeah. Latina wants to make a charm for Rita. Could you help her, Dale?" asked Latina, her request also written on her face. She had no awareness of it herself, but as she tilted her head a bit with slightly upturned eyes, her cuteness would be plenty potent even if she weren't so young. It was enough to make his heart stop beating and knock him unconscious. As she kept on growing, this girl would undoubtedly cause countless men to cry.

However, Latina wouldn't ever show that expression to someone else. Having Latina make a request was a special privilege reserved for Dale alone, and he had absolutely no intention of yielding his following right to being told "thank you" and "I love you." He wouldn't let anyone steal that away from him.

"Well, I guess we do have the materials..."

There wasn't anything particularly rare used in making an amulet. They were made using plants, fruits of the earth that were thought to be especially close to Quirmizi. Rather than using flowers themselves, though, amulets were made with plant fibers that were in turn dyed with flowers. The amulets from temples in town would have complex patterns woven into luxurious fabrics, but the ones from Tislow were simpler, decorated only with woven cords.

“I’ll create the blessing that goes inside, so can you create the bag to put it in, Latina?”

“Yeah!”

The materials Dale had prepared were a bundle of cords in a surprising variety of colors. He pulled out a few and started skillfully weaving them together in front of Latina.

“Dale, you’re amazing!”

“I had to help out with this a lot when I was a kid.”

Children were also recruited when it came to producing decorations for important occasions. In that way, the means of making them were handed down from generation to generation.

“I’ll do it slowly, so watch carefully.”

“Right!”

Just as his parents had once done for him, Dale took the young girl’s hands and taught her the unique method behind weaving together the cords.

†

Despite how handy Latina was, the amulet she had created was still somewhat sloppy. Even so, it had far more care put into it than one from a temple. Rita held it to her chest with a joyful, motherly smile.

“Thank you so much, Latina.” She then turned to Dale, showing him a smile as well, which she never did. “You too, Dale.”

Dale was clearly shaken, having received such straightforward praise from Rita without any joking or teasing. Seeing Rita so happy, Latina looked completely satisfied as well. Latina had given her all to picking out each and every souvenir, so seeing someone happily receive one made her overjoyed.

“For Kenneth, we bought fish and spices from Qualle,” she said, handing him a carefully packed bundle.

Kenneth checked the contents of the package and looked surprised. “Raw fish? Not dried?”

It wasn’t completely fresh, but there was no sign of the big fish in its box of ice having spoiled.

“We have dried fish left, too,” said a confused Latina, offering Kenneth a different package. Inside of it was the leftover dried fish from their journey.

“No, that’s not what I mean...”

“Latina asked me how to transport seafood from the port to Kreuz,” Dale

stated, a bit of exasperation visible on his face.

“It’s like the magical device you use in the shop, right? Latina can’t use Water magic, so she asked Dale, and he helped her out!”

Kenneth and Rita were left speechless, and Dale shook his head with a strained facial expression. “It would’ve been impossible if it was just me, and it wasn’t something just any magic user could do. Latina preserved the ice I made all the way from Qualle to Kreuz.”

“But Latina had to have you remake the ice a ton of times, right?” Latina said with a tilted head. She apparently had no idea how out of the ordinary what she’d done was. As always, her magic control proved to be absolutely outstanding.

“Normally, you’d use a magical device to preserve it...”

Continuing to apply a power over a fixed area required a high level of concentration and technique, and yet this young girl was apparently able to casually pull it off.

“All the food we ate in Qualle was delicious, but Latina wants to try fish Kenneth cooks, too.”

“Well then, shall we use this for dinner tonight?”

There was a lot he had to say, but seeing her hopeful expression, as her “master,” he had to go all out. Looking at the fish frozen in the ice, he immediately started thinking about what to make. Meanwhile, Latina started searching through the bag again.

“Also, we brought back boar meat.”

“Boar?”

“...Boar?”

Seeing the bundle of both cured meats and dried meats that Latina pulled out of her bag, Rita stared at them curiously, while Kenneth raised his eyebrows a bit. There were no mountains around Kreuz, and while there may have been large magical beasts in the forest, they were limited to types of animals that’d normally be found there.

“Dale, this is boar meat?”

“Yeah, but it was a ‘monster boar.’ It’s a type of magical beast that shows up a lot in the area around my home village.”

Kenneth’s face had been one of suspicion towards the large bundle of meat, but with that, it changed to one of understanding. It was too big of a piece to have come from a normal boar.

“We got it from Joseph’s place.”

“Um... He’s that relative of yours, the beastman mix, right?”

“Yeah.”

When Kenneth was still an active adventurer, he’d sometimes taken on guard jobs for merchant caravans visiting Tislow. That was how Granny Wen ended up requesting that he look after Dale when he was first starting out and how Kenneth knew there was a beastman village on the way there.

“Latina got along really well with Maya. She was super cute!”

“That’s great.”

“And she was really fluffy, too!”

While Latina may have reported that with a smile, there was a bit of an awkward expression on Dale’s face as he sat and listened by her side.

“Did something happen...?”

“No... As long as Latina had fun, then it’s fine...”

Staring off into the distance, Dale thought back to what happened at the beastman village.

†

The pair retraced the same path on their way back from Tislow, so they ended up staying at the beastman village once again. On their way there, Latina was in an exceptionally good mood.

“Latina wonders if Maya has forgotten her. Hopefully it’ll be fine,” Latina said, suddenly stopping and looking up at Dale with a worried expression.

“Hmm... I’m sure she’ll remember before long. You became friends so quickly, after all.”

“That’s true.”

Latina took a cheerful skip, causing her ribbon with its elaborate flower design to sway. That ribbon, which she had received from Granny Wen, was her current favorite.

It had been early spring during their stay in Tislow, and even though it was now early summer, it didn’t feel overly hot here in the lush foliage of the beastman village. The pair weaved their way through the trees now covered in deep, dark-green leaves. Before long, the simple village came into view, and Latina shouted, “There it is!”

“Don’t run,” Dale said, successfully putting a stop to Latina just as she was about to break out into a sprint, and the pair walked into the beastman village together. Without showing any hint of being lost, Latina headed straight for the

Bündte home. Stopping before the door to the small house, Latina clenched her fist to knock and then looked up at Dale, seemingly nervous. She must have been worried, just as she'd said earlier. Dale patted her once on the head with an awkward smile and then knocked in her place.

A moment later, Joseph opened the door. The sign of his bliss—his ample belly—hadn't changed at all from last time, and it wobbled along with him. He didn't seem surprised at all to see Dale and Latina. They'd indicated they'd probably come again when they stayed here last time, after all.

"Sorry for imposing, but could you let us stay again, Jose—"

"Watia!"

Dale's question was cut off mid-sentence. Along with that ecstatic shout, a black, fluffy bullet came flying their way.

"Maya!"

As if mocking her father, who hurriedly thrust out his hands to grab her, she aimed for his plump body's blind spot and slipped between his legs. She gathered up her strength for an instant, and then the black fuzz-ball leaped straight at Latina.

However...

"That's dangerous!" Dale managed to grab her just in the nick of time. She may have still just been a toddler, but if she leaped at Latina with that much force, both of them would have ended up on the floor. Latina, with her slender body, wouldn't have been able to catch the living bullet made from momentum and the toddler's full weight. Even if, fortunately, Maya didn't have the same sort of build as her father.

"Watia, Watia!" Maya was kicking and squirming in Dale's arms. It would seem she wasn't fond of being there. "Nooo!"

"Gah!"

Using a headbutt, Maya landed a clean hit to Dale's jaw. He was a pro when it came to brawls and had trained himself to handle them, but sure enough, a violent blow to such a tender spot *really* hurt. It was hard to imagine that attack had come from a toddler. Dale wanted to assume it was just a lucky blow; it was too frightening to imagine someone so young aiming precisely for one of a person's weak spots.

"Watia!"

"Maya!"

Dale quivered in pain but managed not to drop Maya, instead handing her to Latina. Latina looked up at him with concern, but he simply smiled back. With

that, she at last calmed down and hugged Maya, burying her face in the toddler's fluffy fur. Naturally, Dale's smile had been a forced one. It was a subdued sort of pain and not the sort of thing to use healing magic on, but even so, when something hurt, it hurt.

"Watia..." Maya clung tightly to Latina as well, looking blissful and completely satisfied. However, seeming to have suddenly realized something, she tilted her head. "Watia?"

Her tiny nose started sniffing away, trying to catch Latina's scent. All the while, the look on her face grew more and more grim.

"Maya?"

"What is it?"

"Hmm?"

In addition to Latina and Joseph, even Dale, who couldn't read beastman expressions, could tell that something was up. Joseph bent forward a bit, then put his hand on his chin.

"Dale, did you guys run into any big animals or anything?" Joseph asked.

"Huh?" Dale responded.

Just then, having arrived at a conclusion in regards to Latina's scent, Maya unhappily shouted out "Noooo!"

"Maya?"

Paying no heed to Latina's surprise, Maya started rubbing her body up against the girl, going at it full throttle.

“Wah?!”

Maya showed no sign of slowing down in enthusiastically rubbing herself all over Latina, whom she’d energetically knocked over and was now sitting on top of. She was using her whole body, and it was hard to think of it as anything but her rubbing her scent on the other girl. This continued, with Latina looking flustered at having been jostled so. She didn’t seem to know how to deal with the situation. Occasionally she’d let out a strange, pathetic cry as Maya rolled her over.

“Um... what’s going on here?”

“Like I was saying, did you run across any big animals or something? We beastmen can kind of sense that sort of thing from smells. Only sort of, though.”

“Huh... So, why is she doing that?”

“How should I put it..? It’s... you know, like how a wife ends up looking like that when she realizes her husband’s been cheating...”

“Cheating?”

“It was just an example.”

Dale summed up the various things Latina did while they were staying in Tislow, from taming the dogs to petting the mythical beasts into submission. Hearing all this, Joseph gave a nod, half-astounded.

“So that’s it.”

“I see.”

Apparently, Maya wasn’t fond of the smell of something other than her clinging to Latina, and when she’d picked up that those scents didn’t necessarily belong to things weaker than her, her mood grew all the worse.

Latina sat there looking befuddled as Maya hugged her tight and then snorted in approval at her accomplishment. But she didn’t let go of Latina afterward.

“No!” Maya said clearly, shaking her head from side to side.

“Don’t say that! Come over here, Maya!”

“No! Maya wants Watia!”

“Maya...”

Joseph was unable to say anything further, and his triangular ears sunk down pathetically. It was hard to tell how many times they’d gone through this exchange, but his beloved daughter kept on rejecting him. It was eating away at his mental hit points.

Maya, meanwhile, was hugging Latina around the knees and had a burning gaze; she was ready for battle.

“Watia is Maya’s!”

“Waaaaah...”

Having been captured, Latina was in the midst of this chaos, trapped between the father and daughter.

“You sure are popular, Latina...”

Dale was watching all of this from a few steps away. He rudely slurped his tea, staring off into the distance and trying to avoid the reality of the situation. He’d learned many things while staying in Tislow, including that it was essential for people to know when to give up.

“Just try not to do anything too heartless...”

He was in the midst of escapism, so the comment he gave wasn’t really suitable to be addressed towards a child, but Dale wasn’t thinking deeply on what he was saying at all at the moment, and Latina didn’t consider the statement deeply, either.

“Watia, Maya, togetter!”

“Waah...” Latina was flustered and could only think to hug Maya back as the toddler loudly asserted her ownership.

It was then that the front door opened. Joseph’s wife Ute was standing there, with her familiar white fur and green eyes. She had a basket in one hand, filled with plenty of fresh vegetables. Apparently, the reason they hadn’t seen her for a while was because she’d been in the garden.

“Oh, so you two have arrived?” said Ute calmly, noticing Dale and Latina. Dale stood up straight and greeted her.

“Sorry for imposing on you, Ute.”

“Miss U—”

“Watia, no!”

Latina tried to greet Ute as well, only for Maya to thwart the effort. With Maya as she was right now, even Latina paying attention to someone else was apparently enough to make her jealous. It was like she was trying to say, “Don’t look at anyone but me!”

“What’s going on with Maya?” Ute tilted her head at her daughter’s behavior, knowing nothing of what had happened up until that point. After giving a hollow laugh, Dale gave a brief response.

“Yeah... It looks like she wants to monopolize Latina.”

“Her father is too soft on her, so she’s ended up spoiled, hasn’t she?” Ute said, entirely unshaken by Maya’s rampage. For better or worse, she was rather broad-minded.

“Joseph...” Dale called out to the man, who was sitting in the corner looking

downhearted and utterly exhausted, his hit points seemingly whittled away. Both of their gazes fell on Latina petting Maya's fluffy tummy fuzz.

"Did she cry herself out soon after we left last time...?"

"No..." Joseph's gaze drifted. "It gave birth to a legend."

"Sorry about that..."

He dared not to ask what sort of legend it was. The two men remained silent for a while.

"This time..."

"How about leaving early in the morning, before Maya wakes up?"

He may not have wished to drive out his guests, but the desperation in Joseph's voice as he broached the subject was palpable. Apparently, he'd had to put up with quite the outburst last time. Even Dale had been overwhelmed by its power. Considering how loud it was, it wasn't hard to imagine that it had drawn the attention of all their neighbors.

"If we fill her up with her favorite foods, then Maya will get sweepy! That'll be our chance to separate them!"

Hearing his middle-aged relative casually mix baby-talk into his sentence, Dale wondered in the back of his mind when he'd have a kid of his own, not realizing how those around him tended to see him when he talked about Latina.

In front of those two doting idiots was Maya, lying face-down and happily wagging her tail as she was being pet. After ample attention from Latina, she seemed to have more or less calmed back down, and then she set up her stronghold on top of Latina's lap. Separating them didn't even seem to be an option. She wouldn't be able to stand it if she looked away, only for some doggy to steal away all the petting! She loved her big sister above everyone else, so she needed to be Latina's favorite, too. Young Maya's pride and logic led her to that conclusion.

While Latina may have been embarrassed by Maya monopolizing her, she didn't seem entirely upset about it. To have the cute, tiny Maya adore her as a "big sister" flattered and delighted her. She wasn't able to help out Ute, but in exchange, she got to spend plenty of time with Maya. Beastmen didn't bathe as frequently as humans, so they didn't have bathtubs in their homes, but they did keep a basin that could hold enough water to clean yourself off. Even so, Latina let out a cheerful shout as she filled it with hot water and got coated in bubbles along with Maya, which reached the inside of the home itself. This easily brought a calming scene to Dale's mind, and a gentle expression crossed his face.

Ute had prepared a soup with summer vegetables and plenty of meat in a stock pot. It was served alongside bread with a soft cheese smeared on top. Today's dessert was a candied-fruit crumble. Just as Joseph had predicted, both the soup and dessert were some of Maya's favorites dishes. Despite still being just a toddler, she soon gobbled down nearly as much as Latina. Perhaps trying to compete, Latina had unusually requested seconds, so there was still plenty of dessert left on her plate.

Like Joseph had said, Maya grew drowsy now that her belly was full. She always did everything at full force, but she had now run out of power, as if someone had suddenly pulled her plug. Joseph was her father, after all, so he knew his daughter very well.

At first, Maya insisted on sitting on Latina's lap, but when the young girl tried to stand up for dinner, her legs had fallen asleep and she couldn't move; the shock of the numb feeling brought about by the poor flow of blood was enough to cause her to collapse. That never happened to Latina in her everyday life. Maya, therefore, settled for sitting next to her at the table.

After confirming that Maya had started to nod off, the two men winked at one another. Joseph leaped up with a swiftness that didn't match his physique. He scooped Maya up and started swaying with practiced motions.

"Umgh... un..." Maya squirmed around a bit, but she eventually found the most comfortable position and settled into her father's arms. Before long, she started happily snoring away. At the same time, Dale rescued Latina, wrapping his arms around her from behind.

"Dale, it's rude to start playing around in the middle of a meal."

Her reprimand was sound.

She slipped out of his hug and sat back down in the seat next to the one Maya had occupied up until just now. The whole scene was so pathetic that it was hard to think of Latina as anything but an adult dealing with a child.

"Latina, we're going to head out early tomorrow."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I'm worried about the weather, so I want to get out of the forest sooner rather than later."

It wasn't entirely a random excuse, as Dale really was concerned by the somewhat cloudy sky. He did have a plan for dealing with the rain, of course, and when it came to a long trip, you obviously couldn't entirely avoid moving when the weather was bad. But even so, he wanted to do his best to keep Latina from having to deal with anything too harsh. That was a natural feeling for a

parent. But on rainy days, she could happily jump and splash in puddles or look up into the sky waiting for the raindrops to come, not afraid of getting her face wet. It wasn't like such days were lacking in ways for her to act cute. He could keep watching over her forever, regardless of the weather. Anyway, that was a different matter entirely.

Latina had seen the cloudy sky as well, so she accepted Dale's explanation and simply gave a, "Right," and nod of her head.

After dinner, they returned to the same corner as before and started preparing for bed. After they were wrapped in their blankets, Dale held Latina in his arms, which felt only natural for the two. They were in a forest, so the nights were colder than they were in town. Taking advantage of that fact, he brought his cheek in close to feel her warmth. Latina used Dale's arm as a pillow and pointed a relaxed smile back towards him. They were guaranteed a sound, relaxed sleep.

No matter how you looked at it, Dale's actions were born out of resentment for Maya's monopolization of Latina. There really wasn't much difference between him and Joseph.

The next morning, the two doting idiots hung their heads, feeling exhausted and defeated.

Latina was sound asleep, but for some reason there was an unnatural lump under her blanket. Suspicious, the two men rolled the blanket back only to find that Maya had snuck in at some point and was also fast asleep, clinging tightly to Latina's waist. That was the moment they realized they'd failed to outwit the toddler.

"I'll make breakfast, so get ready to eat," said Ute to the backs of the two dejected men.

†

After that journey through his memories, Dale looked up at his "big bro," Kenneth. "Are you going to end up using baby-talk in front of your kid, too...?"

"Of course."

"Did you know, Kenneth? Kids are, y'know... They're amazing, in all sorts of ways..."

"Seriously, what happened?"

Maya's wails had exceeded even the time before, and Latina got caught up in

Maya’s explosive crying and teared up, too. The two men desperately pried them apart, and Latina and Dale fled the scene. With this, the legend grew even further. When they still heard the faint echoes of her cries from outside the forest, Dale felt seriously guilty.

“It really does seem tough, raising kids...”

“You trying to scare me?”

“I’m seriously grateful that Latina’s suuuuuuch a good kid and doesn’t make any trouble.”

“Yeah, it really wouldn’t be smart to think of Latina as the norm.” Even from Kenneth’s point of view, Latina was an excessively well-behaved child. While holding the package of meat he received from her in one hand, Kenneth asked the girl, “Latina, how do you use this?”

“Um, it’s got a lot of salt, to preserve it. It’d be too salty as-is, so you have to wash that all off first.”

Kenneth hadn’t asked because he didn’t know how to use it, but rather as a sort of off-the-cuff test.

“Then you can put it with vegetables to make a soup or something.”

“I see.”

After confirming that she knew how to cook it properly too, Kenneth’s expression lightened a bit. For now, he could give her a passing grade. If she could also prepare the ingredients and present a dish, he would have no problems calling that a complete success.

“So did you manage to cook alright on your trip?”

“Yeah, just like you taught. Latina did occasionally mess up, though...”

“You did?”

“Yeah. The strength of the flame and stuff was tricky, so she occasionally burned things.” Kenneth and Latina looked at Dale while continuing this conversation between master and disciple. “Dale always said that it was tasty every time...”

“Huh? But you really did always get it right, didn’t you, Latina?”

“Well, if he didn’t have any reaction, then I guess there was still merit in making it, but...”

“Huh? But it really was tasty!” Dale asserted.

Both master and disciple cast Dale a sidelong glance and then nodded to one another; they both refused to compromise when it came to cooking.

“So, do you see the task ahead of you now?”

“Yeah. Latina thinks that she needs to work even harder,” she said, looking

serious as she told her master of her future aspirations.

Having been half-ignored, Dale looked over at Rita with a strained expression. “When we were camping, Latina always did the cooking.”

“She really gave it her all, didn’t she?”

“Was she... not satisfied with that...?”

“It seems that Latina’s been heavily influenced by Kenneth in some strange ways.”

There was a clear difference in enthusiasm when comparing this conversation to the passionate one between master and disciple.

While looking over at Latina, Rita’s eyes suddenly stopped on the ribbon tying up her hair. “Oh, my, that’s quite a cute ribbon.”

“Um, it’s Latina’s protective charm. She was told to keep it on when she traveled,” Latina responded in a lively voice, happy that Rita noticed it. It was a refined, gorgeous, and wide ribbon that shined gently in the light.

“It’s made from something Latina got from friends she made in Tislow.”

“Oh, so you made some friends? Good for you, Latina.”

They both broke out in carefree smiles, but Dale looked like he had to hold himself back from saying something after hearing their exchange. Kenneth had no idea what part of that conversation was causing that reaction, but he decided to throw a guess Dale’s way.

“Did Latina do something...?”

Kenneth was well aware that she wasn’t exactly an average girl.

“It’s more that I’m still astounded that there’s a mythical beast habitat next to my village.”

“That’s a hell of a story you brought back from your travels...”

“It’d be dangerous if someone did something stupid, so it’s probably best to keep this information to ourselves. It’s not a breeding ground. A pack actually settled there.”

“You sound like you actually went and checked it out yourself.”

“Yeah, I did. And I’ve got to say, if some greedy adventurer went rushing in there, there wouldn’t be even a single bone left of him.”

“Even you couldn’t handle them?”

“I talked to the leader of the pack, but I wouldn’t really want to fight him... I could probably take them on one-on-one, but there’s just too many of them. I’d get overwhelmed eventually.”

“I see.”

While staying in his home village of Tislow, Dale’s common sense had

become skewed, but he remembered something important from Kenneth's reaction. Normally, having a casual chat with a mythical beast would be unthinkable.

"The leader seemed pretty fond of her."

"Of who?"

"Latina."

"I see."

Kenneth had guessed as much midway through Dale's explanation, so he wasn't surprised in the least, but his facial expression did grow strained, just like Dale's.

It was most certainly an abnormal traveling tale.

†

Latina wasn't a foolish enough child to keep doing the same thing after being thoroughly scolded. She was smart enough to understand that Dale and the other adults were upset with her because they were worried about her. After that point, when she wanted to go play with the soaring wolves, she made sure to get permission first and didn't go off into the mountains alone. She made that promise to Dale, and she was sure to keep it. By nature, Latina was excessively earnest.

The soaring wolves' very existence was a secret, and although Granny Wen and Dale didn't always have the time, Latina didn't even think of asking the acting clan head, Randolph, to take her; he always seemed so busy. She thought it wasn't right to interfere with others while they were working, so she didn't spend as much time with Randolph as she did with Granny Wen and Dale's mother, Magda. Because of that, she ended up holding back a bit from talking to him. If she had looked at him with upturned eyes and asked, "Could you help, Papa Randolph?" he would have likely consented right away, although Latina didn't know that. He *was* Dale's father, after all.

Latina looked forward to interacting with the soaring wolves, even after Dale caught her. And having seen firsthand that the soaring wolves looked forward to that as well, Dale couldn't just go and ban her from seeing them. It would be no joke if they showed up at the village in full force seeking Latina. In addition to breaking the promise between his ancestors and the soaring wolves that neither would invade the territory of the other, it would also cause an outbreak of panic.

As a result, Dale ended up visiting the soaring wolf settlement several more

times. After they had decided on when they would head back for Kreuz, he also accompanied Latina when she went to tell them that she'd be leaving.

"Latina's heading back to Kreuz. It's been lots of fun. Take care, okay?"

"Hmm?" The wolf cub looked up at Latina in confusion. "Croots?"

After checking the position of the sun, Latina pointed towards the northwest. There was a rugged mountain range in the way, but Kreuz was in that direction.

"Kreuz. It's a human town over that way. There are a whole lot of people, and Latina lives there, too."

"How inconvenient it must be for you children of men, being unable to soar through the skies."

It was clear that the alpha's concerns were pointed solely at Latina, but Dale didn't especially mind.

"You look so feeble, lacking fur and fangs, so surely even small beasts can harm you, yes?"

Seeing the massive carnivore restlessly wagging his tail, for some reason Dale didn't feel quite as intimidated as he did when they first met. For whatever reason, the geezers who gathered at the Dancing Ocelot sprang to mind.

While Dale was thinking that, the leader and cubs started staring at them.

"We bestow this upon you," he said, indicating several feathers that had fallen where he was sitting.

"Feathers...?"

"If you have something awash in our mana on your person, then mindless beasts shall not approach you, due to their fear of us."

"That's a big help. Thank you."

Thanks to the shared point of loving Latina, the two were able to establish cross-cultural communication, despite being of entirely different races.

After returning to the mansion, Dale reported to Granny Wen that they'd received feathers from the soaring wolves. After emptying out the ashes from her pipe with a single *clunk*, she matter-of-factly said, "We can't use them for hunting, but we have overcoats that ward off animals while we're on trips and working in the fields, right?"

"Now that you mention it..."

"Those have soaring wolf fur woven into them."

Hearing it put so bluntly, Dale found himself chuckling.

"They're also used in the ropes to keep beasts away from the fields. This year Latina gathered up an awful lot, so we won't be wanting for materials for quite some time."

When she said that, Dale recalled that Latina always diligently scooped up the pile of fur after she was done brushing and placed it in a bag. Apparently, his grandmother had instructed her to do so.

“Normally, I have Randolph gather up whatever comes off of them naturally during this season. Thanks to Latina, he has a little less work to worry about.”

When the season changed over from spring to summer, the soaring wolves shed their old fur. Countless times, Dale had seen the soaring wolves scratch their itchy necks with their hind legs, only for their fluffy fur to then dance through the air. The soaring wolf settlement was a secret limited to the clan heads, and when Dale thought of his father using the limited time in his busy schedule to clean up the soaring wolves’ space... Maybe he should feel grateful for Latina’s work.

That said, though, it was no simple cleaning. The fur, fangs, and bones of magical beasts carried mana in them and were highly valued as material. They were also used quite frequently to make magical devices. Collecting the material was the quickest way for adventurers to earn money, and when it came to material from mythical beasts, which were even stronger, the value jumped further. It certainly wasn’t a waste of time to gather them up.

In Tislow, the magical devices made from fur, fangs, and bones were used as work clothes worn out in the fields. This would make not just adventurers, but merchants as well, shed bitter tears.

“We can’t be open about how we got our hands on the materials, so we can’t sell them to the outside.”

“That’s for sure.”

Granny Wen popped up and fished through the drawer by her side. Before long, she pulled out a long and narrow cloth.

“I made this as a test. I picked out the finest fur possible and wove it together.”

It was an extravagant ribbon with Tislow’s traditional flower emblem design on the fabric and additional embroidery sewn on top.

“She can wear it on the way back. That’d help give me some peace of mind.”

“If you put a price on this, it would be insane.”

Perhaps because it had been made by fine fur, the fabric was slick, smooth, and lustrous, like satin. Even if it weren’t a magical device, it would be obvious at a glance that it was a valuable item.

“It may be better not to wear it in town...”

“It can be something special, for festivals and the like.”

After shooting an astounded look back at his cackling grandmother, Dale held the gently sparkling ribbon up to the light.

†

“And so, she ended up with a new ribbon magical device.”

“That’s one hell of an item.”

It would be useless for adventurers who made a living exterminating magical beasts, but there’d be a lot of merchants and travelers who would want one. It wouldn’t just be for when they were moving; they’d want to lower the risk of being attacked when camping, too. It wouldn’t be a good idea to put too much faith in it, but the world was overflowing with enough danger that it was no surprise that people would cling to anything that could make things safer for them.

“The craftsmanship is second to none for my village, too.”

“I don’t know anything about accessories, but I can tell that there was a lot of effort put into it.”

“It really is beautiful work, isn’t it?”

Dale was at a loss for words at the sudden intrusion of *her* voice. He froze, then awkwardly turned around.

“H-Helmine...?”

“It’s been a while, Dale. I figured this was around when you’d be returning, so I came to pick you up.”

There was a blond beauty standing there with a wide grin on her face.

“Who’s that?”

Seeing this unknown woman acting so close to Dale, Latina tilted her head and stared at Helmine. Normally, Latina would immediately introduce herself upon meeting someone for the first time. It was rare for her to act so impolite.

With Latina’s suspicious gaze fixed on her, Helmine couldn’t keep herself from giggling.

“So this is the ‘little magic user,’ huh? She sure is a lovely little girl, just like you said.”

“Latina isn’t little,” responded Latina, puffing up her cheeks a bit in displeasure.

“Wh-Why are you here...?”

“Like I said, I came to pick you up. I’ve been waiting here for you to return so I could deliver your orders to come to the capital. I’m going to be

participating in your next job.”

Dale was too shaken, so he didn’t have a chance to call Latina out for being rude. To be honest, he wasn’t very good at handling this beautiful woman, and now, right before his very eyes, she’d launched a surprise attack. That obviously threw him for a loop.

“You’re as bad at dealing with Helmine as always,” Kenneth interjected, with more a tinge of sympathy than surprise.

“I-I’m bad at that...?”

“Oh, my, how awful. You’re bad at handling me?” said Helmine, showing no sign of actually being offended. “You used to say such adorable things, too...”

“Like I said, he can’t deal with you. You really haven’t changed at all since when I was just starting out.”

“You always gave me the cold shoulder.”

Kenneth looked at her in astonishment, and she responded with a slight tilt of her head. The crook of her neck was seductively showing. It was a well-practiced action and based on how others looked at her.

“My type is women like my wife.”

“You sure are blunt, aren’t you?” Helmine giggled, again seemingly not at all offended.

Averting her gaze a bit from this exchange, Rita looked at Latina, whose cheeks remained puffed in displeasure.

“Oh, my...”

Helmine certainly had no problem earning the animosity of her fellow women. She was always conscious of men’s gazes on her, and she used her feminine appeal freely, so other women instinctually saw her as an enemy and avoided her.

Rita always tried to remain businesslike, so she didn’t show any clear discomfort. Her husband Kenneth stated that he had no interest in Helmine, which helped with that. No matter how you looked at it, the young couple that ran the Ocelot had a happy relationship.

“You’re a girl too, aren’t you, Latina?”

Seeing Latina spin a small souvenir she’d bought in the port town in her hand, Rita broke out in a slightly strained smile. Even after Rita realized how she was feeling, Latina still sat there pouting in silence, only to then suddenly realize something. She got down off her chair, walked over to Dale’s side, and hugged him tight.

“Latina...?”

“Dale, you have work? Will it take long again?” Latina asked, with loneliness and sadness written on her face. Their trip, which had lasted several months, had been the longest period of time Latina had had Dale all to herself. Even if he went out during the day, they always spent the nights together. They’d eat together, and talk together, and sometimes even sleep together, snuggling close. She should’ve known that it was something special, but now that it had ended, it was just too painful.

“Yeah... I’m sorry. I’ll have to have you hold down the fort all the time again.”

“No, it’s fine. Latina can handle it.”

Latina unconsciously pushed her face up against Dale with even more force. And then she stayed that way, seemingly unable to look up.

Dale’s expression softened. He was conflicted.

Rita and Kenneth whispered some live commentary.

“How rare, seeing him hold back.”

“It’s because Helmine is here.”

“Latina... will wait for Dale. But she wants to stay together just a bit longer.”

Dale’s hands started shaking and moving strangely. There was a strained expression on his face, and he was left speechless.

“Oh, my, you sure do spoil her, don’t you?” Helmine asked, landing a mental strike on Dale from behind as he stopped himself right at the brink.

“It’s my fault for always having to leave her behind! But... but she always tries so hard!” Seeing Latina all depressed, Dale grabbed her and scooped her up.

“I see. So you’re the one who’s been pampered, it seems.” It was then that Helmine threw out those words, almost as a threat. She let out a high-pitched laugh, finding this truly amusing. “Well, I won’t say you have to head right back out after such a long trip. I’ve got some business to take care of around town, anyway,” Helmine said, then turned around with a grin and a light wave of her hand.

“See you later, Dale.” Helmine headed for the second floor of the Ocelot, where the guest rooms were. Apparently, she was staying there.

“Dale, was that person someone you work with...?” Latina whispered after Helmine was completely gone.

“Yeah. Despite appearances, Helmine’s a first-rate magic user,” Dale replied with a sigh, then lowered Latina down to the floor.

“Just from work?”

When Latina asked again with her big eyes staring straight at him, Dale's gaze wandered a bit. "She's just a work acquaintance."

It wasn't a lie. But for some reason, he still felt like he was being interrogated.

Latina was going to say something, but ended up holding her tongue. Her reaction was somehow different than usual, throwing Dale off further.

"L-Latina...?"

"When Latina becomes an adult, she'll get big. She's still a kid, so that's why she's small." From her puffed-up cheeks, it was obvious that her pride had been injured. She was a bit smaller than other children her age. It wasn't due to her race; it was just how she was. Her height and weight were steadily, healthily advancing. Her size wasn't enough of an issue to be a real problem. Even so, Latina didn't seem fond of how often people around her called her "small."

Dale understood how she felt. He had no lack of bitter memories of being made light of for his youth rather than people recognizing his abilities. He felt that same sense of rebellion against the judgments of others, which were beyond his control.

He understood, but...

"You're fine staying small, Latina... You're cute, after all," he said without thinking, despite understanding what Latina was feeling. He couldn't help himself, because even her smallness was just that cute.

"That'd be a problem for Latina. She wants to be big."

Casting a sidelong glance at Dale and Latina, Rita closed one eye and said to her husband, "Latina's a girl, right? Then she should have a vague suspicion."

"A woman's intuition sure is a terrifying thing..."

Both of them had known Dale longer than Latina, so they were aware that his relationship with Helmine was work-related. However, they also knew there was a stipulation there.

After returning to their attic room for the first time in a while, Dale felt a cold sweat rolling down his back as he watched Latina unpack the luggage and clean up. Her mood didn't appear to have improved at all. For today, she would immerse herself entirely in this sort of work, rather than helping Kenneth. She silently devoted herself to getting it done. As soon as Dale had spoken up, she went to steadily work away at the not-at-all insignificant pile of luggage. He thought that this silence was the result of that.

"L-Latina...?"

"What?"

“C-Could you cheer up...?”

“Latina isn’t in an especially bad mood.”

The conversation ground to a halt.

“I-I’ve never seen Latina in such a bad mood before...” Dale muttered to himself, so frozen on the spot that he was unable to even wipe away the dripping sweat. He choked back tears, thinking it’d be easier if she would just come out and say she was upset.

“Dale.”

“Yes?!” he replied, his voice cracking.

Latina stared straight at Dale, who couldn’t hide how unnerved he was.

“W-Well...”

“You don’t need to worry about it,” she bluntly stated. This girl had had a tendency to be stubborn since the day they met. When she was like this, Latina was unlikely to speak any further.

“I’ll be on the first floor, so...”

“Right. Latina will come when she’s done cleaning up.”

While thoroughly savoring the joy he got from even that brief response, Dale hurriedly chose to make a tactical retreat. As a result, he didn’t see Latina puff out her cheeks again after having been left all alone in the attic room.

“Latina... really does wish she could hurry up and become an adult...” The brunt of her displeasure as she muttered that was directed both at the fact that she was a child and also at Dale telling her not to worry about it.

Rather than heading into the shop, Dale sat at the table in the kitchen with his head hung in shame, crestfallen. Kenneth left a steaming cup in front of his “little brother.” The deep-blue tea inside swayed gently.

“I made it extra strong. Use it to prepare yourself for the worst instead of drinking.”

“I won’t screw up like that... I’m not like I used to be.” He grumpily puffed up his cheeks, but of course when someone like him did it, it didn’t even come close to Latina’s cuteness.

Having just hit a break in his work, Kenneth plopped down right in front of Dale. “So you don’t have any more regrets?”

“I got rid of those a long time ago. I learned my lesson.”

“Right? That’s why I figured it wouldn’t be a problem, so I let Helmine stay here. It is my inn, after all.”

“That’s just business, so you don’t need to worry about me,” Dale said and then sipped the tea, after which he made a bitter frown.

“Oh, I see... Looking at you, it seems Latina’s bad mood has a bigger impact on you than Helmine does.”

“That’s right! Why is Latina so upset...?!”

“That’s...” Kenneth started to say, but stopped himself from going any further. When a father talks about remarrying, his daughter often feels jealous towards the new woman. No matter how you looked at Latina, she was feeling similar jealousy and caution towards the appearance of this woman near Dale, who she had to herself up until now. But for some reason, Dale hadn’t realized that, and if Kenneth pointed it out, Dale would probably cry, “Latina cares... about me that much...?!” while choking back tears of joy. Then, he’d undoubtedly scoop Latina up and cling to her tight. If it ended there, then that’d be fine, but it would surely be followed by plenty of bragging and praise. And who would have to put up with that? Kenneth? That’d be irritating. A real pain. And it’d piss him off, somehow.

For that reason, Kenneth opened the lid of the teapot and stared at the tea leaves. It was a meaningless action meant to avoid the matter.

“What’s wrong?”

Having come down the stairs, Latina tilted her head at the two men. In her hands, she held the cleaning and laundry supplies. Apparently, she’d already finished up some of the tidying.

“Latina’s the real grownup here...” Kenneth muttered.

That was because the young girl, who had thrown herself into her work and gotten her feelings in order, once more wore her usual expression on her face.

2: The Young Girl Reminisces with Her Friends

Standing before Kreuz's temple of Asfar for the first time in several months, Latina hesitated a bit as she looked up at the door. For some reason, she had frozen up and felt somehow embarrassed. Even though she was intimately familiar with the place, she felt strangely unsettled.

"They're both Asfar temples, but it really is completely different from Master's place..." she whispered, once more becoming aware of that fact. She nodded in understanding, thinking about how there were all kinds of things in the world that she didn't understand.

While she was musing on such things, trying to take her mind off her meaningless embarrassment, a familiar voice called out to her from behind.

"Latina!"

"Chloe!" Joy and relief washed over Latina's face as she turned around. The instant she saw her friend, the oppressive feelings weighing down her heart lifted.

"Welcome home! I'm real glad to see that you're looking fine. I'm looking forward to hearing all kinds of stories!"

"Right! Latina's back, Chloe!"

As a result, when Latina walked through the door alongside Chloe, her expression was back to normal, and it was hard to tell that several months had passed. They passed through the polished hallway, heading for their assigned classroom. A fairly large number of children from all over Kreuz learned here, so when they entered their second year, they were split into separate classrooms. Advanced schooling was held in a separate building, but since they shared a library and other such facilities, the younger students occasionally passed by the older children.

The classroom was overflowing with natural light and had a bright, open feel to it. The benches and desks were lined up systematically, but there were no assigned seats. Even so, over time the students naturally ended up always sitting in the same places.

"Long time no see, Latina."

“Latina’s glad that you’re doing well, Sylvia.”

“It’s been the same as always in Kreuz. Nothing ever changes.”

Another of their friends was already in the classroom. Latina’s expression grew even brighter upon seeing Sylvia for the first time in a while. Paying no heed to Latina’s reaction, Sylvia leaned forward at her own pace. Her green eyes sparkled, as if to show her overflowing curiosity.

“More importantly, tell me about your trip. Chloe already told me the basic route you took. How much equipment and food did you take? Were there really a lot of magical beasts? Also—”

Latina knew that Sylvia, who had divine protection from Akhdar, was fascinated by traveling, so she responded with a troubled smile. “It’s hard to answer all that at once.”

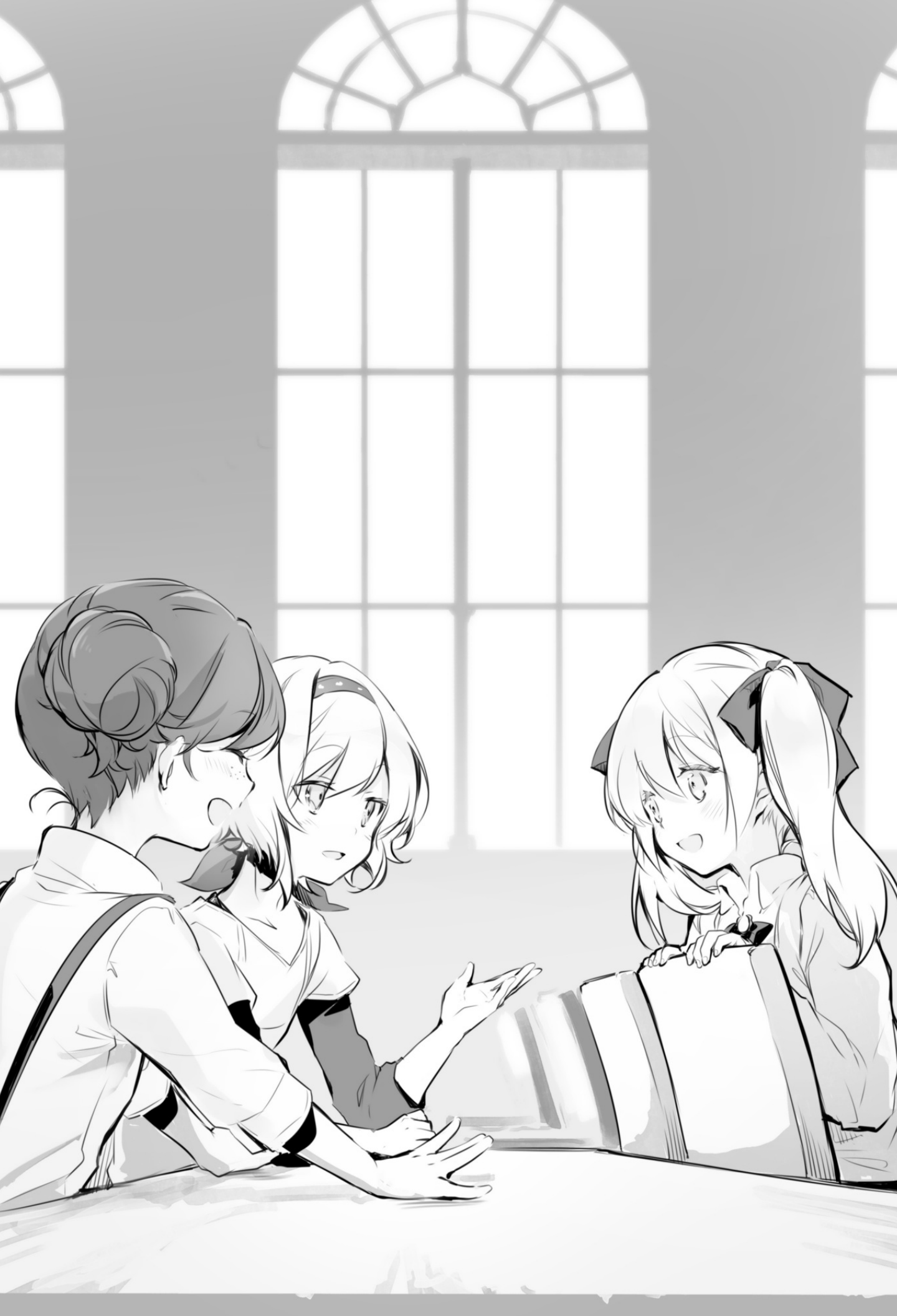
Latina sat in the seat in front of Sylvia and turned around. She chose this spot rather than sitting beside both Chloe and Sylvia was because it was easier to talk this way. The three rotated their seats so the person who sat in front changed each day.

“Latina saw a lot of magical beasts when we first went into the forest,” Latina replied.

“Were you alright?” Chloe asked in concern.

“Ooh, what type?” Sylvia questioned, letting her curiosity show.

“Dale was super strong, so it was totally fine! Latina learned defensive magic too, so she helped out.”



“You fought too, Latina?”

“Latina just helped a little. Dale would’ve been fine on his own, too.”

“Weren’t you scared?”

“When Latina was there in the past, before she came to Kreuz, she was really afraid. But having Dale with her, she wasn’t scared at all.” While talking about her guardian like that, her expression was full of trust and affection.

Seeing Latina look like that, as always, Chloe and Sylvia broke out in somewhat awkward smiles.

“Magical beasts didn’t show up near the highway. We did see them sometimes after entering the mountains, though. And we did run into robbers once.”

“That’s awful!”

Chloe’s reaction was the obvious one. However, Latina tilted her head a bit and matter-of-factly and readily responded, “Dale caught them all with magic and then contacted a nearby village, and we were done with them. They were less scary than the magical beasts.”

†

Dale and Latina encountered the robbers shortly after they started walking along the coastal highway. It was an important road for distribution, along which goods were carried from Qualle to all over. In addition to travelers, there were a great number of merchants and caravans that traveled along it. There were a lot of concealed paths off into forests around there, but Dale hadn’t heard of any robbers showing up there from the information he had gathered ahead of time.

Latina was the one who realized their presence first.

“Dale...”

“What is it?”

Latina tugged on his sleeve, a worried frown on her face. Dale was confused by her actions, and she started to say something, but instead moved close to him, looking like she didn’t know what to do.

“Is something wrong?”

“Um... Latina has a bad feeling,” she whispered, standing on her tip-toes and bringing her mouth to his ear, taking care so that no one else would hear.

“A bad feeling?”

“Yeah, from over there... in that forest.”

Dale stopped walking and stared in the direction she had indicated. He didn’t

doubt Latina's ability, so he was just stopping to check for himself. Because Latina had told him there was something there, he was able to perceive a presence he never would have noticed otherwise.

"Over there, huh...?"

It was quite far away.

Even for Dale, it was exceedingly difficult to sense the men hiding in the forest holding their breath. They may have had a scout on lookout, but they wouldn't even be considering the possibility that they'd been noticed by Dale and Latina from so far off.

Well, I can't blame them...

They weren't aiming for Dale and Latina to start with, and the distance between them was enough that it was illogical to even consider them as targets. Nobody would think to pay such attention to them when they were nothing more than a few of the countless passersby.

Dale looked over the highway, and his eyes stopped on a single, horse-drawn wagon. It wasn't an especially extravagant carriage, but even so, it was quite well built. It had been attentively maintained, too. At a glance it appeared plain, but he could tell that a good bit of money had been spent on it. In other words, it was likely the carriage of a merchant with a steady income. He assumed that wagon was the robbers' current target.

"How should I handle this...?" he muttered, considering his options. He wasn't the type to be a good Samaritan, walking around saving each and every complete and utter stranger he came across. To Dale, making sure Latina was safe came first. It wouldn't do at all to get involved in some trouble, only for it to lead to Latina being put in danger. If they hurried and passed on through, he could just claim to know nothing about it. But if Latina learned about it and became disillusioned, that'd be a problem.

What was wrong with wanting to be a good person when he was in front of Latina? A single "Dale, you're so cool!" from Latina would be far more valuable to him than the praise and admiration of society at large.

"Hmm..."

"Dale?"

But still, he wanted to avoid getting into a fight while Latina was watching. She may not have even flinched when fighting magical beasts, but he couldn't imagine she'd want to see people getting hurt—or even dying, depending on the circumstances.

He couldn't imagine people aiming to commit a robbery would be that

considerate, though. It was entirely possible that the attack would occur right in front of Latina's eyes. That would hurt Latina greatly, deeply saddening her. And that would be no laughing matter.

He got the feeling that it'd be better to deal with that source of potential sorrow sooner rather than later.

"Should I crush them...?"

"Huh?"

Latina responded to Dale's ominous whisper with a blink of surprise.

Before moving in towards the robbers, Dale had Latina put up her hood. She was such a cute, beautiful little girl that even seeing her just once would leave quite an impression. Even though the chances were slim, he couldn't risk them harboring a grudge against her. Now that Latina's face was hidden, he had her lead the horse as she walked slowly down the highway.

Meanwhile, Dale sprinted. He greatly closed the distance before the robbers had a chance to notice his sudden movements. As he ran, he tempered his mana and chanted a spell.

"Oh earth and the spirits dwelling within you, by my name of Dale Reki, I order you."

The arrows the robbers unleashed in the chaos weren't coming at a trajectory he needed to worry about. He avoided them without any need for haste. In order to deprive the enemy time to compose themselves, he fired off an arrow of his own from the gauntlet on his left arm. It was a warning shot, but there was no need to purposefully miss.

"Shift your form according to my wishes, and swallow up all around you. 〈〈Ground transfiguration〉〉" he chanted, finishing the spell. It was Dale's greatest specialty—Earth magic. It wasn't a direct attack; rather, it was meant to control the field of battle on a large scale. And for Dale, when it came to Earth magic, his mana wouldn't become exhausted, no matter how much he pumped into the spell. As a result, he was able to cast a Transfiguration on such a large scale that a normal magic user could never handle it.

A section of the forest vanished. Along with the ground itself, a ridiculous number of trees were swallowed by the abyss. Without a chance to even scream and having no clue of what was happening, the robbers fell to the bottom of the pit. It was a rather dirty move. Before the robbers that were left standing could realize what had happened, one of them was kicked into the hole. Another swung down his blade in a panic, only for it to be repelled by a gauntlet. Fearing a counterattack from his now-compromised position as well as getting kicked, he

distanced himself.

However, it was then that Dale's magic activated. He had used a short chant, so it only caused a tiny bump to pop up out of the ground, but that was still enough to trip someone. For the finishing blow, Dale broke one of the man's legs so he couldn't move, then tossed him away.

Sensing that everything was over, Latina suddenly peeked into the forest from the highway.

"Dale, are you alright? You're not hurt, are you?"

"I'm fine, Latina. You really are a kind girl."

The expression he pointed her way made him look like a completely different person than the man who had coldly fought the robbers that were now in the hole.

"You guys sure are lucky..."

He'd be fine just filling in the hole with them in it, but that would, of course, anger Latina. Rather than having some humane reason not to do it, he was just worried that it would have a negative effect on her upbringing. If he pulled his punches against such violent, unruly foes, he'd be the one who was in danger.

Because Latina was nearby, Dale wanted to avoid making a cruel, blood-soaked scene, so he'd held back such that none of their lives would be in danger. Well, a few of them may have gotten crushed by trees, and he couldn't say they'd walk away with just minor injuries in that case, but it'd be fine since Latina couldn't see them down in the pit.

"It's a pain, but I guess we'll go to a nearby village and request that they take care of them."

There may have been a bounty or two amongst the group. Dale figured that'd at least serve to compensate him for the trouble. He urged Latina to follow him, and they returned to the highway.

†

"It wasn't scary at all."

If the robbers in question were to hear that, they'd likely break down in tears, but that was truly how Latina felt. The danger she'd felt from the magical beasts had been much greater.

"Um, Latina has souvenirs for the two of you," she said, fishing two packages carefully wrapped in multiple layers of thin paper out of the bag she was holding and then passing them to Chloe and Sylvia. Upon peeling back the

paper, they found small shellwork accessory cases. They'd been made by affixing mother-of-pearl to the case itself, so they gave off a gentle, sparkling light and were beautiful enough to catch the eye despite being small enough to be held in a single hand.

"They're so pretty!"

"Thanks, Latina!"

"Latina bought one for herself, too. Each of them is a slightly different color."

Chloe's was a faint cream, while Sylvia's was bluish. The one Latina had bought for herself, which was on display back in her room, was a pale pink.

"There were all sorts of things in Qualle."

With a smile on her face, Latina spent the remaining time until the teacher arrived reminiscing about her time in the port town.

†

Latina and Dale also stopped in Qualle on their way back home. After renting a room in the same inn as before and dropping off their luggage, Dale said to Latina, "This time around, we'll take our time here. But today, we've got to focus on resting up properly rather than sightseeing."

"Right!" Latina energetically responded, after which she started rummaging about in the rucksack she always wore. Dale watched in confusion for a bit until she pulled out her wallet, apparently having tucked it away in an inside pocket.

She started laying out her silver coins on the desk and counting them up. She hadn't purchased anything aside from what she needed for the trip up until now; as a result, she hadn't used up much of the money she had on hand.

In Laband, the currency primarily used by the common masses consisted of copper and silver coins. When children went off to buy snacks, they'd do so grasping several copper coins tight in their hands. Silver coins were the largest amount needed to cover everyday living expenses. Most people never had an opportunity to use gold coins. Adventurers handled gold coins when receiving their rewards or paying for expensive equipment, but they didn't usually keep them in their wallets. And if you brought one out in your average store, you'd earn their ire for having to make change.

As long as you weren't too far out in the country, it was exceptionally rare for people to hold onto their entire fortune. It was safer to keep it in the Azraq temples, and also more convenient.

Seeing Latina finish lining up her silver coins, Dale let out a sigh. “You’ve got quite a bit there...”

As Latina had been getting paid for working at the Ocelot, she had more money than most girls her age, and since she was so sensible, there were no worries about her spending wastefully. As a result, she’d been steadily building up her savings, helping to secure her future.

“Um, Latina’d like to buy souvenirs for Chloe and Sylvia, and Rita too. There are lots of pretty things for sale here in Qualle, so she wants to go shopping.”

“Got it. Let’s go around the market tomorrow, then.”

“Yeah!”

Last time they were in Qualle, Latina had only shown interest in purchasing food. That had worried Dale a bit, but she’d apparently been that way only because they were heading out on their trip, not returning. Now that he saw her showing interest in things more appropriate for her age, he felt somehow relieved.

Latina was fond of both cute and sparkly things. Dale started mentally overlapping a map of Qualle with a list of places he thought would make her happy to visit.

After having such a conversation on their first day there, they turned in early. The next morning, they got out of bed a little later than usual, and after finishing breakfast at the inn, they headed out into town.

So they didn’t get lost in the crowd like last time, they held hands. Today, Latina let her hair run down her back, after having spent the whole trip with it up so it wouldn’t get in the way. She looked a bit more prim and proper then she normally did.

“Should we have dinner at the Silent Seagull again tonight?”

“Can we really?”

“Or would you prefer to eat all sorts of stuff as we walk around, and keep dinner light?”

“That sounds fun, too...”

This was apparently quite a difficult choice for Latina. She groaned as she thought it over with a serious expression on her face. Dale found it cute, and his expression brightened.

Even when she was troubled, Latina was still enjoying the trip.

Not wanting to rush her decision, Dale held Latina’s hand while slowly heading towards the ocean. As they walked along, they noticed the delicious

scents drifting through the air from all over. The option of walking and eating was steadily growing more enticing. In the end, Latina fell to its temptation. With things as they were now, if they ended up restraining themselves so they could have a delicious dinner that night, they'd go crazy.

Dale and Latina took a slightly different approach than they took last time they had walked around the market, which was still full of shops handling marine products. A great many travelers visited Qualle, and quite a few of them were tourists. As a result, there were a lot of shops aimed at them, including stalls serving the town's famous seafood.

Latina chewed away with all her might at the small shellfish skewer she'd bought from one such stall. As she was such a polite girl, she wasn't able to walk around and eat at the same time, so she and Dale stood off to the side of the road as she struggled with her food, which was tougher than it had first appeared.

"I'll eat the rest, Latina."

"Mmph!"

Her mouth was still full of shellfish, so Latina responded by shaking her head. With her tiny stomach, even a single skewer would fill her up quite a bit. That would take away half the fun of walking around eating.

Latina was shocked when she saw Dale easily gulp down the shellfish she'd been struggling with.

"Should we buy something to drink?"

"Yeah," Latina said with a nod. Dale took her to a nearby stall stocked with foreign fruits. The unfamiliar fruit juice they purchased was more refreshing than he had expected. While drinking his down, he handed one to Latina as well. With a big gulp, she at last succeeded at swallowing the shellfish in her mouth.

"Haaaah!" she let out, finally able to breathe. She seemed to have surprised herself at how loud she was. She put her hands over her mouth and looked up at Dale in embarrassment. "It was tough."

"I see. They're still shellfish, but the ones over there are steamed in wine, so they're softer. Do you want to give it a try?"

"Yeah! That sounds tasty!"

As they purchased the wine-steamed seafood with the scent of garlic to it, Dale started to want alcohol rather than juice. You never saw such foods around Kreuz, but when you were close to the sea, this sort of dish was often paired with drink.

After seeing Dale use the shell to scoop the meat from the shellfish, Latina gave him a look of surprise and hurriedly tried to copy him.

“It’s yummy!”

As she chewed thoroughly, the umami flavor spread throughout her mouth. The garlic taste wasn’t too strong; instead, it served as a nice accent. Latina was engrossed in eating the still-hot meat, sucking in air to cool it down as she went. Dale was extremely satisfied as he watched. He could never grow tired of any of her little mannerisms.

“How about we look for souvenirs for a while, and then we can stop to eat if anything else catches our eye.”

“Yeah. This is a fun way to have a meal!” Latina said with a smile, thoroughly enjoying herself.

There were souvenir shops aimed towards tourists past the row of stalls, both shops that handled small items and miscellaneous goods from other countries, as well as ones that focused on goods from Laband, meant for serving foreign travelers and tourists.

“There are some fairly high-class inns and the like further down this road. Merchants and the more affluent commoners from other countries stay there.”

“Latina sees.”

“Nobles hardly ever stay there, though. Well, you might see some lower-ranking nobles there. In addition to stocking up, there are also plenty of customers who want souvenirs or other unusual goods.”

“Looking around the marketplace was fun, but it’s also nice to look into shops like this!”

Dale held Latina’s hand tightly so she wouldn’t go wandering all over in her excitement.

“There are a lot of people around here. And you have to watch out for pickpockets, too,” Dale warned, pointing a finger at her, and her expression seemed to be almost saying, “Whoops!” As they walked along, they looked into one shop after another. Sure enough, Latina stopped at shops with cute, girlish items on display. Not only that, but they’d stop in shops with countless suspicious folk crafts from other countries, only to pick up something of unknown purpose and both laugh at it.

After several shops, Latina decided on a ceramic doll for Rita’s souvenir. It was a delicately crafted piece that Dale wouldn’t have considered as a present for her.

When the shopkeeper was carefully wrapping it up, Dale realized it was noisy out front.

Dale and Latina looked at one another, then headed outside and proceeded

towards the boisterous crowd. It wasn’t an air of panic, but rather pure curiosity. As a bundle of inquisitiveness herself, Latina was growing restless as well.

The center of all the attention was a gorgeously dressed girl. From the guard and maid with her, it was clear that she was from a rather well-off family. However, because of her impish behavior as she walked along with light steps, peeking into shops as she went, it was hard to say for certain that she was a noble. It was proper to refer to her as a “girl,” as her appearance still had some childishness to it, and her neat and tidy outfit enveloped her slender form. She wore a casual dress that was too short to be called a gown, and further down, she had sturdy leather boots on her feet. In that attire, she clearly gave off a different image than sheltered, rich young ladies.

The expression on her charming face shifted as she looked at one item after another in the store fronts. She was a girl who attracted the gaze of others.

“That’s the ‘Rose Princess’...”

Hearing Dale say that with a sigh, Latina tilted her head.

“Dale, do you know her?”

“Ah, no, I’ve never met her. I’ve just heard rumors. But that’s definitely her... Nobody else has a hair color like that...”

It wasn’t just the girl’s beautiful appearance that drew the gazes of those around her. The light reflected off of her sleek, long, shiny hair. What the light hit was a pale pink, while the portion in the shadows was rose. It was a vivid color of the sort that people didn’t naturally have.

“A mana trait...?” Latina asked.

“You sure are well informed. Did Master Cornelio teach you that?”

“Yeah, he did. Back where Latina was born, someone had a mana trait. Those show up a lot in devils.”

“The same is true of merfolk. Everyone in that race has strong Water mana, after all.”

“People who are born with strong mana have pretty-colored hair and eyes and stuff, right?”

“Is that the case with your hair, Latina...?”

Her hair was a beautiful, unusual color, so Dale had considered that possibility, but this was the first time he’d actually asked her. However, Latina shook her head back and forth in response.

“Latina’s mana isn’t strong. And her hair is the same as Rag’s. It’s hereditary,” she answered readily.

Like how animals with strong mana became far more threatening magical beasts, mana could have an effect on a great many things. Mana traits came in the form of brilliant colors that appeared in people born with strong mana, making them easy to perceive. Those colors generally appeared in hair and eyes, but occasionally affected skin as well.

The colors were entirely different from those that children inherited from their parents. In fact, the brilliant hues were of a sort that people didn’t naturally have in general. That was the phenomenon known as “mana traits.”

The merfolk that Dale offered as an example were a race that specialized in Water mana. They primarily lived in the water, and thanks to their racial traits, they were able to breathe under it as well. As a race in which mana traits often appeared, many of them had brilliant green or blue hair.

Devils were also a race in which mana traits frequently manifested.

All that said, it wasn’t as if everyone with strong mana had a mana trait. The ratio also varied greatly by race. For devils, they were not particularly

uncommon, whereas humans were rarely born with them.

“She’s called the Rose Princess, but she’s just the daughter of a regional lord. Her family isn’t actually all that high up there in terms of social class.”

“It’s a pretty color, isn’t it?”

“Her eye color should be a mana trait, too. An indigo blue, the symbol of the god her divine protection comes from... She’s a high-ranking Niili priestess.”

“You know a lot about her, Dale...”

“She’s an acquaintance of a friend of mine, so I’ve heard a lot about her.”

The image of his overly serious friend came to mind. In the depths of his heart, Dale decided that when they next met, he’d tease him thoroughly on the matter.

“At any rate... you know your own amount of mana, Latina?”

“Latina doesn’t know the exact amount. But you see, Rag was really good at magic. He didn’t have a lot of mana, though. Rag taught Latina that she was the same way.”

Rag was the name of her father. Had she inherited her excellent mana control from him?

That may be the case... I mean, no matter how clever she may have been, even before she met me, she’d already been taught healing magic and the basics of mana control...

Latina had never explicitly said it, but Dale figured her magic teacher had been her father. She’d said that when she was young, she didn’t have much contact with anyone outside of her family, and from what she occasionally told Dale, he sensed that she had been quite close to Rag.

He’d likely been a great man.

“So there was someone with a mana trait even in your home village, Latina? What were they like?” Dale asked casually, remembering what Latina had said earlier.

“Purple hair...” Latina responded with a sigh, a mature, peaceful expression on her face. “She had beautiful, lovely purple hair.”

She seemed like she was looking at something far away.

†

“I’ve heard of the Rose Princess. She’s got strong divine protection from Niili and is supposed to even be able to heal the sort of serious injuries that normal healing magic can’t handle,” said Sylvia enthusiastically after Latina

mentioned she’d seen the Rose Princess.

Latina and Chloe nodded along.

“Must be nice... I wish *I* could go on a journey, too...”

Chloe and Latina exchanged strained smiles at Sylvia’s absentminded muttering. This was how things always were. Feeling like she’d truly returned to where she belonged, Latina let out a little *tee-hee*.

That was when a loud, hysteric voice rang out through the classroom. “L-Latina?! You’re back?!” The owner of the voice stood stock-still, unable to hide the surprise and delight on his face.

“Long time no see, Rudy.”

“Yeah. Latina, when did you get back...?”

“The teacher’s here, so we’ll talk later.”

Latina smiled when she said that, but there was thick tension and a large distance between them.

Furthermore, when Rudy stiffened up at her response, the other children couldn’t hold back their laughter any further.

He really wasn’t good at dealing with things, in more ways than one.

3: The Young Girl and the Woman Who Was Her Natural Enemy

For a while now, Kenneth had been Latina's primary conversation partner. It wasn't Dale, who she always said she loved so much, or Rita, who was the same gender as her, but Kenneth.

She most certainly didn't think of Dale as unreliable. She was well aware that he was her guardian and that he was responsible for her actions.

Dale was someone special and very precious to Latina, and that was precisely why she was so afraid of him coming to dislike her. She was worried she'd upset him by causing him trouble. And as a result, she saw being selfish or burdening him with her problems as weighing him down, which she didn't want to do.

Lately, Dale been giving her far more attention and affection than was fitting for someone her age, so she wasn't as eager to deal with him as she used to be. She no longer took care to make sure she wasn't seen as a child. As proof that she now let her guard down around others, she held each mistake and bit of mischief as precious and used them to make the adults around her smile. Old habits did die hard, though.

Rita was always dealing with customers and paperwork at the counter in the Dancing Ocelot. Latina was a very serious girl by nature, so she thought it wouldn't do to bother Rita while she was working.

Ever since Latina first came to the Ocelot, she spent a lot of time with Kenneth in the kitchen. A big reason for that was because she had an interest in cooking and she could learn while helping him out. As Kenneth was a reliable "master" who was tolerant and good at looking after others by nature, it was also only natural that Latina ended up depending on him.

Right now, though, Kenneth was terribly bewildered. Latina was in front of him, looking downhearted and staring at the ground.

He'd known that this tiny girl had a great number of secrets hidden away in the depths of her heart. But even so, he had never imagined that one of those secrets would cause him to feel so uncomfortable.

It started with her talking about her mother.

As Kenneth listened to Latina talk about the woman, whom she'd never

mentioned before, he let out a sigh, playing with the half-peeled potato in his hands all the while.

The whole problem had started with Helmine staying here in the Dancing Ocelot.

Dale sent word of his return to Duke Eldstedt soon after making it back to Kreuz, and just as Helmine had said, he received notice of an upcoming operation to subjugate demons. The reply also noted that his visiting the capital to give an official report of his return could wait until when the time came for the job.

The scent of a coming blaze apparently drifted about the small neighboring countries, so as prime minister of Laband, the duke was terribly busy.

Such matters fell outside the jurisdiction of someone like Dale, who specialized in dealing with demons and demon lords.

A private message from his friend Gregor, stating that he was busy on a mission guarding his father and brothers, was included along with the letter from the duke.

Apparently, it was true that Helmine had business in Kreuz, as she headed all over town meeting up with old friends. Because she was a flashy woman, a rarity in the Ocelot, she was an obvious target for gossip.

She had no intention of probing into Helmine's movements, but Latina naturally ended up hearing about them regardless. And as always, that put her in a bad mood.

This time around, everyone was well aware of what was going on, but Latina wasn't any good at hiding her feelings. She had always been friendly towards others up until this point and would greet them with a smile, so they never figured she would act like this. But perhaps these frequent mood swings were a characteristic of hers, too.

Latina wore her usual smile, but the displeasure written on her face was, to put it simply, because she wasn't good at dealing with Helmine. Her overly obvious reaction made this a widely known fact not just to Helmine herself, but to the customers in the shop as well.

If we may digress, the day that Dale and Latina returned, the number of customers was a little low for the Dancing Ocelot, but the day after that, the shop was far more bustling than the norm. The news of the return of the shop's signature cute little waitress spread from one of the regulars, a gatekeeper from the southern district, to the rest of them through some sort of information network. Those regulars made a plan. They decided to let the Platinum Fairy

Princess, everyone's idol, rest up on the day she made it back from her trip. For that reason, they suppressed their desire to see her and held themselves back from visiting on that day. After all, if the serious young girl saw that the shop was busy, she'd start helping out rather than worrying about taking care of herself. And in that case, it was better to avoid such a situation to start with.

But as a result of that buildup, the shop was absolutely packed the next day. There weren't even enough seats for the customers, so wine barrels were brought out into the storefront to serve as temporary tables, around which customers stood and drank. Seeing the old folks' intimidating faces all turn to smiles as they lovingly watched the young girl happily run about the shop working, Dale and Kenneth let out a sigh, realizing that it may have been no mere rumor that the regulars of the Dancing Ocelot had started a non-profit organization of Kreuz adventurers, a Latina fan club.

Helmine was there as well, and Latina looked displeased, but the woman simply found that amusing. Nobody else was able to get between the two of them, and Dale in particular was left clutching his stomach.

Being treated like a little kid by Helmine upset Latina greatly. She'd never been fond of her small build, so she was especially sensitive to words like "little." When Dale or Kenneth said she was small, she didn't look overly displeased because she sensed it came out of affection towards her. But it seemed not just anyone had permission to say such things.

Helmine was a bad opponent for her.

While watching Latina wipe the counter, Helmine rested her chin on her hands and, only smiling with her eyes, said, "You really are an adorable little lady."

"Latina's busy working right now," she firmly responded, self-conscious of how she looked and sensing that Helmine was calling her "young."

Since Latina was short, she needed to stretch her arms and stand on tip-toes in order to clean the corners of the counter. Seeing her work so hard was enough to make even someone who wasn't a doting idiot like Dale break out in a goofy smile.

"There's a lot of things you can only do when you're a kid, so you don't need to be in such a hurry to grow up," Helmine responded calmly, already a mature adult herself. She knew that Latina saw her as an enemy, but she just laughed it off as the actions of a child.

Latina puffed her cheeks up in response to Helmine's laughter. That habit itself was a childish one, but such things usually weren't conscious actions to

begin with.

Latina had an inferiority complex about being a child. She couldn't help but find Helmine's words disagreeable when the woman stood in the superior position of being an adult.

"Latina will grow up soon," Latina replied, then turned around and rushed into the kitchen. Helmine was a customer, so she couldn't follow the young girl there, making it a safe zone.

When Latina entered the kitchen, her shoulders were squared up and she was fuming, but the moment she reached her usual spot and sat down, she deflated like a balloon.

Latina seemed to be thinking hard over something as she stared down at the floor.

Kenneth put down a bucket full of vegetables with a *thud* and sat next to her. He started silently working without asking her anything; he was just waiting by her side until she was ready to talk.

"Kenneth..." she whispered quietly after a while.

"What is it?" he replied, still not stopping his hands. Kenneth had come to understand her quite well over the past few years, so he knew that it was easier for her to talk if he acted nonchalant.

"Will Latina get bigger when she's an adult...?"

"You may be smaller than your friends, but you've gotten taller than when you first got here, right? You really are growing."

"Right..."

Even so, Latina's expression didn't lighten up. She brought her hands to her chest and let out a deep sigh.

"Latina may not get big, even when she becomes an adult... Rag said Latina was a lot like Mov."

"Mov?"

"Yeah... Mov was small, so Latina may stay small, too..."

Having never heard the word before, Kenneth repeated his question, taking a guess at the meaning.

"Who's Mov, Latina?"

"Latina's female parent... her mother."

Just as he'd thought, it really was a person's name: that of her mother.

Kenneth realized how unusual it was for Latina to be bringing up her mother. But despite the surprising and sudden topic, he kept on skillfully handling his knife, not letting how shaken he was show.

“What sort of person was your mother?” Kenneth asked, seizing this chance.

“Mov was small. Latina’s hair and horn color came from Rag, but her horn shape and face apparently resemble Mov’s,” Latina replied, then let out another sigh. “Mov was an adult, but she was small. The customers say that bigger is better, too. Does Dale like big ones as well...?” she muttered.

“Hmm...?”

Kenneth noticed something was off. He felt a discrepancy between what she was saying and what he’d been thinking. He stopped midway through peeling a potato and looked over at Latina. She was looking down and seemed depressed... and both her hands were on her chest.

“Latina...?”

“What?”

“What did you mean when you said your mother was small...?”

“Her chest...”

The first thing he learned about Latina’s mother... was that she had small breasts.

That was just too ridiculous, and even Kenneth couldn’t help but be thrown off. Couldn’t she at least talk to Rita when it came to things like this?

“How about talking to Rita....?”

Kenneth said it reflexively the second it came to mind, but for some reason Latina turned pale.

“Rita isn’t big.”

Well, it was true that his wife was more of a slender beauty. But it wasn’t like she didn’t have them at all. That certainly wasn’t the case.

“You can’t ask someone who isn’t big about that. Latina asked Mov why she was small a long time ago, and she almost got her cheeks pinched off.”

Apparently Latina had asked her mother about it straight and gotten scolded harshly as a result. It must have been quite terrifying, as she was now holding both hands to her trembling cheeks.

“I see...”

Now that she mentioned it, Helmine had a rather womanly figure in that regard. This may have been a matter beyond his realm of understanding, though.

“How about... drinking some milk?”

“Will Latina get bigger?”

“Well, that’s a myth...” he said in consolation.

Sure enough, Kenneth didn’t have extensive knowledge about large breasts. He couldn’t offer any help beyond such folk tales. And should he share this

information with Dale? Just what sort of face would the other man make when Kenneth broached the topic? And just who was the idiot who taught Latina that “bigger is better”?

While continuing to peel potatoes, Kenneth sought answers for such unanswerable questions.

†

The school that Latina and the other children of Kreuz attended in the temple of Asfar was a facility meant to teach them only what was necessary. As a result, their studies weren’t difficult, and their education only lasted for a short period of time. The standard was to just teach reading, writing, and arithmetic. Add in a rough overview of the history and geography of Laband and its neighboring countries, and you had the full curriculum.

Depending on the household, children were also sometimes an important source of labor. There were some families that weren’t happy having them wrapped up in going to school for so long. Because of that, after graduating from primary schooling, it wasn’t required to continue on to advanced schooling, which was an option meant for households with the means or for those who wanted to keep learning.

Primary school students left home in the morning and returned just past noon, so it didn’t take up too much time each day. Many children would wait until they got home to eat lunch, but Latina would always eat and chat together with her friends at school.

Since Latina was studying cooking, she made her own lunches. She polished her skills day by day under Kenneth at the Dancing Ocelot, but it was difficult to find time to let her cook from start to finish in the busy kitchen. And so, once she finished helping with the food preparation for the morning, Latina borrowed a corner of the kitchen to make her own lunch as independent practice.

Since she made it herself, she was interested in what others thought, and thanks to the natural flow of things, Latina ended up showing off her lunches to her friends, Chloe and Sylvia. When Rudy realized this, he dragged along his childhood friends, Anthony and Marcel, and heavily insisted that they should eat lunch together with the girls. As everyone but Latina found it hard to say anything, simply exchanging gazes with a mix of teasing and pity, Rudy gained an opportunity to occasionally sample Latina’s home cooking.

This occurred on one such usual day.

“By the way, why does Rudy have Latina’s horn?”

Latina’s sudden question made Rudolph Schmidt spit food from his mouth.

“Rudy, that’s gross...”

Not even taking time to worry about Latina’s frown, he looked over at his other friends. The one he was most suspicious of was Chloe, who currently looked surprised. The runner-up was Sylvia, who seemed to find this amusing. Anthony also looked shocked, but he never betrayed Rudy at times like this, and besides, he trusted his old friend. Marcel had a wide grin on his face, but, well, that was the norm for him.

“Wuh, wuh, wuh...” Rudy uttered incomprehensibly, his face turning a shade of red that wouldn’t lose out to the hair on his head.

“Hmm? Why?” Latina innocently stared straight at Rudy. She didn’t seem especially concerned by how shaken he was.

“Why...? You’re just imagining things, Latina...” Rudy said, reflexively grasping his necklace.

“Hmm? But that’s Latina’s. She can tell just by looking,” Latina stated, tilting her head.

Rudy figured that the black shard on a leather strap dangling from his neck would just look like a well-polished stone to the others. That had been the case for everyone else, so he underestimated his friends, who knew the circumstances behind it, and figured they wouldn’t know what it was either. But Latina had seen right through it. Of all people, it was the one he wanted to know least who had figured it out, and that really shook him up.

“You figured that out just by looking at it, Latina?” Sylvia asked, finding this curious.

“Yeah.”

Looking at Latina’s expression, it was clear that she didn’t know why everyone found this so odd.

“Everyone else can’t tell?”

“It looks like a stone. It’s a deeper black and glossier than an animal’s horn.”

“Hmm... Um, Latina can see a sort of mana presence. Can you all not see that?”

“I don’t get what you mean.”

Latina tilted her head and thought on what Sylvia and Chloe had said, and after a while, she looked up and said, “Now that you mention it... Um, Dale told Latina that what she sees may be a bit different than what everyone else does.”

That was the conclusion Dale had come to when Latina was able to easily tell

individuals apart in the beastman village. Devils had greater abilities than the other races, so it was possible that she was able to see something that humans couldn't.

"That's amazing."

"Really? Anyway, why do you have it?"

Rudy was praying that the discussion would keep on flowing and leave the matter unsettled, but he was left lamenting how that prayer went unfulfilled, his gaze darting to the right and left as he searched for a way out.

"That's... you see..."

"'You see'?"

As Latina cutely tilted her head, Rudy gulped.

"Because it was unusual..." he responded.

His friends were all shooting disapproving stares at him.

Right. He knew that response was no good, too. He was well aware, so he just wanted them to leave him be.

However, the cute little girl before them far exceeded their expectations.

With a brimming smile and a joyous expression, she said, "I see. It's unusual, huh?"

She accepted that...?

Each and every one of them whispered that in their minds.

The young girl was clever, but she was off in some strange ways.

"Chloe, you have one too, right?"

"Yeah. Your horn's beautiful, Latina."

"That makes Latina happy for some reason. Thank you, Chloe."

With a bashful smile, Latina accepted far too easily that that was the only reason Rudy had her horn.

Anthony and Marcel both slapped a hand on one of Rudy's shoulders at the same time as if to say, "Please, just leave it at that."

The lunchtime discussion then shifted to Latina's "natural enemy" of late. She wasn't able to complain about her to her guardians, but she could easily do so around her friends.

"She's always telling Latina 'You're so small' and 'It's because you're tiny'! She's awful!" Latina grumbled with puffed-up cheeks, a sight that Chloe and Sylvia had grown accustomed to seeing. "Latina's still in training, but she is working. Kenneth even praised her skill. You can't say that about a little kid!"

Latina was a far more reliable worker than some unskilled adult. In addition to working at the Ocelot, she also managed Dale's share of the housework on top

of her own. And from looking at how her homemade lunch had turned out, it seemed clear that her cooking skills were also progressing smoothly.

Latina was far more self-reliant than her age would imply. She was also much more prideful than you'd think from looking at her cute exterior. She couldn't stand being judged as being just a "little kid."

"Latina wants to hurry up and become an adult..." she said, looking depressed as she stared at the ground. She'd done that a lot since Helmine showed up. "If Latina were an adult, she wouldn't have to stay behind... She'd definitely be able to help Dale out a lot more, too... And Dale would understand Latina a lot better..."

Latina was in a bad mood and depressed because of her guardian. And she was also so rashly competing with the adult woman because she was frustrated that she was a child.

Not realizing that the gloomy feelings swirling about his own heart were the same sort that Latina had, Rudy ended up opening his mouth without thinking and shouting, "Well, you *are* small, Latina!"

"Latina's growing properly!"

"See, you still refer to yourself in the third person, like a baby!" He actually found that habit of hers cute, but he ended up unthinkingly spouting out words that were the opposite of what he felt.

That single line from Rudy inflicted great damage.

"Huh...? What...? Like a baby...?"

Staggering a bit, Latina became lost in her own thoughts.

Rita, and Miss Clarissa... Granny's a bit different, though...

Still dizzy, she recalled the adult women that she knew. Then she looked around at her friends' faces.

"Wah..."

What a shock! Even though it was Rudy saying it, he may have been right!

Finally, the adorable little girl she had befriended came to mind.

"Latina's the same as Maya?!"

Maya was still just a toddler.

Even though it had come from Rudy, he *was* right!

With the shock from this realization clearly written on her face, Latina sunk down, heartbroken, as the strength drained from her body.

†

This occurred at night on the day of that shocking discovery.

Dale was alone at the counter of the Dancing Ocelot, sipping away at a glass of alcohol. Latina was still a child, so her work ended before the nightshift. When it was this late, she was already dreaming away. The number of customers in the shop had also shrunk considerably. As there weren't streetlights throughout the town, nobody really moved around late at night.

As the hustle and bustle of the shop had quieted down, the sound of ice rattling about in his glass could be heard clearly.

Dale looked up briefly as the woman with slender shoulders entered the Dancing Ocelot, only to return his gaze to the glass in his hand.

"Were you meeting an old boyfriend again?"

"Oh my, are you jealous?"

"Of course not. I'm just feeling pity for the guy," Dale sighed, and Helmine laughed and sat next to him at the counter.

She really hadn't changed at all since when he first met her. She may deny it herself, but whenever he ran into her like this, he wasn't able to find even a single difference. Apparently, that was also true for people who had known her longer, like Kenneth.

"You should just scoop up someone passable and settle down already..."

"So you can say things like that now. You've gotten older."

"I'm plenty old enough, as far as us humans go."

"That may be so," Helmine said with a giggle and a smile as Dale took another sip from his glass, looking a bit appalled. He had no intention of drinking himself into a stupor, but he also couldn't face this she-fox sober.

Helmine called over Rita to bring her some liquor as well. He saw her slender fingers fluttering in the corner of his vision.

"Don't be so quick to apply your common sense to us."

"Is that a lecture?"

"It's advice." Helmine kept talking as she swirled the glass in her hand, making the ice clink all the while. "It's just not possible. It might sound virtuous to talk about spending your whole life with feelings for just one person like you humans do, but it's not realistic."

Looking at her from the side, as her long eyelashes cast shadows on her face, was like staring into an abyss, which you wouldn't expect from her youthful appearance.

"Just think about it. Even when two people are the same race, it isn't rare for there to be a gap of several hundred years. If your partner were to die first, could

you go on living thinking of them for the rest of your years? That's just too cruel... That's why those of us from races with long lifespans don't choose special partners. The deeper you care for someone, the harder it is to part with them."

Dale silently listened to Helmine's words while staring into his glass. He thought of his precious child's smile. Someday, he'd pass away, leaving her behind. What could he do for her until that time came?

"Still, you really don't have any integrity, do you...? Just how many men's weaknesses have you preyed on?"

"Oh my, don't put it like that. You all just age too quickly, always leaving me behind."

"I'm telling you, that's no excuse for always aiming for guys who are practically still just little brats."

"It just kind of happens to turn out that way. And I like to think that I have a good eye for men."

Helmine's words weren't entirely off the mark, as many of the men she had wrapped around her finger in the past were famed for being second to none. They all held bittersweet memories, from back when they were young and inexperienced, of the woman named Helmine.

"And I'm pretty faithful, I'd say. I've never two-timed anyone."

"It'd be simpler if you *were* that type of woman... Then I could just hate you."

"Really?" said Helmine, giggling once more.

Dale may not have been good at dealing with her, but he couldn't bring himself to hate or despise her. Those other men surely felt the same way about her, too.

"Unlike men, women live bearing risks, you know? If the chance came around, I'd like to meet a man I wouldn't mind having children with."

"How blunt..."

"It's because you've become an adult... and a father."

As she said that, she spoke with the tone of someone talking to their kid brother and her face held the composure of someone older.

"Why do you think people like me are called half-elves?"

It was normal for those born with the characteristics of two races to be called mixes, but only those born to a human and an elf were called "halves." Not knowing the reason for that, Dale shook his head.

"In addition to humans, elves can also have mixed children with angels. But

the two races' values are just too different, so they never associate with one another to start with."

Angels were even shorter-lived than humans. They stuck to their own villages and lived according to their own cycle. There were also very few of them. The area they lived in also didn't overlap with the elves' territory, so elf-angel mixes were virtually nonexistent.

"That 'half' is key. Half-elves only live half as long as pureblooded elves. But that's still an excessively long life compared to humans... And so we're left alienated. Do you get it?"

Dale silently shook his head, so Helmine continued on, like a teacher admonishing her student.

"Elves are different than devils. It takes time for them to reach maturity. Far too long, compared to humans. A human parent can't raise a half-elf child. And..."

A dark shadow fell over Helmine's face. There was a bitterness mixed into her voice.

"An elf parent's half-elf child will grow old and die before them."

“Does this have something to do with your list of lovers...?”

“It does. I don’t have a need for anything but a human or half-elf child. If I get together with anyone but a human man, then there’s a chance of birthing a child of some other race, right?”

She glossed over her bitter expression with her impish actions as she easily uttered that vivid line.

“If I’m with a man from another race, there’s a chance I could become pregnant with an elf. In that case, I wouldn’t be able to raise the child. I just wouldn’t be around long enough... Well, at any rate, the odds are low to begin with.” The races with long lifespans had low birthrates.

Dale reflected internally how he had thought of her as just “playing around.” He washed away his youthful memories with the contents of his glass.

“Why are we suddenly talking about this...?”

“Who knows? I wonder...” Helmine said, giggling once more and hiding away the bitter expression she’d just shown. She may have still been off in some place that he still couldn’t reach. “We long-lived races have our own troubles, and our own reasons too. Don’t forget that even your human reasoning can hurt us. You’re a parent, right?”

He obviously knew who she meant. He figured with her powers of observation, Helmine had already realized.

“Someday, after I die, will you help Latina out...?”

“I don’t want to,” Helmine bluntly responded. She looked at Dale, a gentle smile showing in her eyes as they narrowed. “If she’s precious to you, then you’ve got to live for as long as you can, alright?”

The ice in the now-empty glass let out a high-pitched *clink*.

4: The Young Girl’s Wish

I want to become an adult, she thought.

That person who had saved her was precious to her, and she loved him so much.

In that forest, she was so scared, and lonely, and hungry, and hurt, and she thought for sure that she was going to die. But his final wish had been for her to live, so she felt like she needed to keep on fighting.

That precious person had saved her, heart and body—her life.

He was the first person outside of her family to say that he loved her. He was also the first one other than her family to hug her.

He brought her to that warm, happy place where she could feel safe.

She really loved everyone.

She was grateful to them for letting her do new things, and praising her, and scolding her when they needed to.

So she wanted to hurry up and become an adult...

Up until now people had always done things for her, so she wanted to grow up and be able to give something back. She wanted to become someone who could save someone else, like that person, who was kinder than anyone else.

And the things that were impossible for her now would surely become easy when she was an adult.

When she became an adult, she’d be able to be there for him when things were hard or painful. He wouldn’t just tell her “I’m alright.” That kind person had told her it was alright not to smile when she didn’t feel like it, and he’d let her cry. She’d be able to embrace him when he felt like crying, too. And she could stay by his side when he went out on work, when he might get hurt.

She wanted to stand by his side and support him, rather than be a child who was only someone to be protected.

Surely, she just couldn’t do all that properly because she was just a small child right now. If she were an adult, she’d definitely be able to do it. That had to be the case.

And so, she wanted to hurry up and become an adult.

And... And if she were an adult, then she could learn about herself and about

how Dale was before she met him, and she wouldn’t lose to anyone else.

“Latina... wants to hurry up and become an adult...”

“That again? You’ve been saying that a lot, lately... You should take your time growing up. You don’t have to force yourself to be an adult.”

Dale wore an awkward smile as he responded to the girl’s usual muttering as of late, patting her head all the while.

He remembered how he’d felt like he needed to be an adult right away back when he left his village. It was hard to not be an adult, and to not be treated like one. That awkward smile was because she reminded him of his old self. This pair may have been quite alike.

That’s precisely why he thought what he did.

He wanted her to take her time growing up. He wouldn’t say it was wrong to try to push yourself, but once you were an adult, you could never be a kid again.

He wanted her to grow up healthy and carefree, without any worries. As a parent, it was his duty to protect her time as a child, as well as the privileges that come with that.

†

Rita was super cool. She did a lot of work and was firm even with the large men who came to the shop.

Latina needed to work hard so the customers saw her as a proper, full-fledged employee rather than a “little lady.” Latina couldn’t hope to become bigger than Kenneth, but she wanted to become a cool woman like Rita. Not someone who was thought of as cute, and would get told that while working. If she could be firm like Rita, then maybe they wouldn’t say that.

And Rita looked really, really cool protecting Kenneth’s precious baby in her big belly, too.

Was she kept safe in her mother’s belly as well? Did she get gently stroked across the divide of her mother’s stomach each and every day like that? Did her mother wish for her to be born?

Would she be able to do that herself someday? That would be nice...

“You really are a lifesaver, Latina.”

“Really? Latina’s happy to be of use.”

“I’m not very good at needlework.”

They needed to prepare a lot of diapers for the coming baby, and it was Latina who sewed them. She’d learned the basics of needlework from Chloe’s

mother, and then studied further under Granny Wendelgard in Tislow. With one created by Rita's mother as an example, it wasn't very difficult work for Latina.

"It's just straight stitching, so it's not hard."

As she said that, the needle in her hand kept on swishing along. Latina seemed like she could even manage to make the baby clothes if she were taught the method to do so, but instead that task fell to Rita's mother, who was eagerly awaiting her first grandchild.

Family-oriented jobs were already Latina's forte, and she was by and large better at them. But even so, Latina earnestly respected Rita.

Rita truly excelled when it came to her ability to process paperwork, as well as the accounting surrounding both jobs and stocking that was essential to running a business. Latina wasn't bad at math, so she understood just how skilled Rita was.

"Around when will the baby be born?"

"In the fall. I couldn't handle giving birth while suffering through the summer heat."

"You're not good with heat, right, Rita?"

While they were having this conversation, Latina decided to think on how to best keep Rita cool this summer. She liked making frozen sweets, and Rita enjoyed eating them. But Kenneth did warn her that it wouldn't be good for Rita if she overate, either. She needed to think up another method.

Latina didn't mind being warned by Kenneth, as she didn't want to have a negative effect on Rita or her baby. She was kind by nature, so that was just how she thought.

"Latina wonders if the baby will be a boy or a girl."

"I'm fine with either. I just hope it's born healthy."

As Rita said this with a smile, Latina thought she looked truly cool.

†

Latina could only spend every day together with her friends up until the end of summer. When fall came, their second year at the temple of Asfar would come to an end, and everyone would have their own schedules.

It made her somehow feel slightly lonely. It wasn't as if they were saying farewell, and they'd still be able to play together like always, but it'd be a bit different.

Chloe said that she'd work at her home as a tailor, just like her mother. When

Latina said she'd use her pay from the Ocelot to commission clothes from Chloe, her friend responded with a smile, saying, "I'll make something special to suit you, Latina."

She liked cute pink and flowing clothes, but Chloe said, "It's a waste, always sticking to that!"

Latina did admire more mature clothing. But Chloe always said that clothes you like and want to wear aren't always what suits you best. When Latina grew up, would she be able to be stylish? Could she look cool wearing clothes, like Chloe did?

Sylvia decided to go into the temple of Akhdar. They wouldn't be able to meet up much anymore, but since the Ocelot had an Akhdar flag, there were plenty of means to contact one another, Sylvia had told her with a somewhat mischievous smile. Latina thought that was just like her.

Sylvia said she'd be learning magic, as well as training in self-defense. Akhdar priests traveled all over the world and would seek out dangerous places no one had ever been before. She said she'd like to someday visit Vassilios, the country of the devils. When she made it there, would there be a new First Demon Lord? That may make it a little safer for her to visit there.

Marcel planned to train at his family's bakery. He always shared bread from his family's place at lunch, so Latina was well aware of how tasty it was. The Ocelot got their stock from a different store, but she thought maybe she should buy from there every now and again.

He was helping out in the shop even now, and often got worked up talking about taste and ingredients. He promised he'd teach her how to bake bread sometime. Kenneth said he couldn't compete with professionals when it came to topics like yeast and kilns, so this was a great chance to learn firsthand!

There was still quite a lot that she needed to learn. Meals in Kreuz and Vassilios were completely different. There were surely lots and lots of recipes and ingredients and cooking techniques out there that she didn't know, and she wanted to learn as much as she could.

Also, it made her really glad to hear someone else say that the food she'd made was delicious.

Anthony was continuing on to advanced schooling.

Speaking of which, the teachers at the temple were all really surprised when they heard how Latina had studied with Master Cornelio. Apparently, he was quite the renowned teacher. It would seem that she'd learned quite a bit already, even without continuing on to advanced schooling. She may not have studied

any math or foreign languages, but she'd learned all kinds of things and greatly enjoyed it.

She'd have to ask Anthony what sort of things he was studying when he started going to advanced schooling.

And Rudy would do something other than carrying on his family business.

"The town guard?" Latina asked, tilting her head.

"That's right. After graduating from school, I'll join the reserve corps, where I'll undergo training and do subordinate work in order to become a guard," Rudolph responded, averting his gaze a bit. It would be embarrassing if she asked him why he wanted to join the guardsmen, who maintained public order around Kreuz.

The town guardsmen were the only ones who could face the adventurers head-on.

He wasn't born with any special abilities, and though he was born and raised in a place with plenty of weapons, he had never studied how to handle them. Even if he decided to be an adventurer, it was very likely that he'd end up dead before he could build up his skills.

In that case, it was far more logical to take advantage of the fact that he'd been born in one of the biggest towns in Laband, and join the reserve corps to undergo training to become a guard. As someone who wasn't even yet a guard, he couldn't even imagine just how inferior he was. He hadn't even reached the starting line of being able to be compared. He was prepared and would do whatever he needed to get closer to being his ideal self.

Rudolph may have often been called an idiot, but when he wasn't in the vicinity of Latina, he was able to think calmly to at least some degree.

"There are a lot of guards who are customers at the Ocelot. Latina hopes you'll come too, Rudy!" Latina said with a smile, seemingly having no interest in why Rudolph had chosen that job. This made Rudolph feel the complex, conflicting emotions of relief and disappointment.

"It's not just adventurers who visit the shop?"

"Yeah. Guards and gatekeepers come a lot, too. The other gates are too far, though, so it's only ever just gatekeepers assigned to the south gate."

"Do people from the reserve corps visit...?"

"No... The guards said to Latina before that people from the reserve corps work themselves to exhaustion each and every day. They don't have much time to go out and have fun, he said."

The guardsmen reserve corps lived in barracks. This was not only for

training, but also to drive the organization’s rules and hierarchy into them.

It wasn’t as though he wouldn’t have any spare time whatsoever, but he and Latina certainly wouldn’t be able to see each other as often as they had up until now. But even so, if he could at least manage to become a guard, it wouldn’t be strange at all for him to brazenly visit the Dancing Ocelot each and every day.

That was his goal for the time being.

At this point, Rudolph hadn’t even imagined... what it meant to be introduced to the regulars of the Ocelot, who were recognized even by the guards to be of especially high positions and ability.

He hadn’t even considered how he’d look to those regulars when their idol, who some of them called the “Platinum Fairy Princess,” introduced him to them.

In many ways, Rudolph would have eyes on him from all around soon after joining the reserve corps.

That wasn’t all bad, though. Having such attention on him when it came to training meant he’d receive more enthusiastic coaching than the other trainees.

However, that would prove far more intense than he could possibly imagine.

†

Today as well, that person she loved so much hugged her tight and told her “goodnight.”

This was the place where she felt most calm. It was a precious place where she felt warm, and relieved, and relaxed.

Perhaps this made her childish, but though she thought of saying she could sleep on her own many times, she was never able to do so.

When she was left at home and went to bed by herself, she always felt her heart tighten. She’d curl up into a ball in the cold sheets and hug her pillow tight as she closed her eyes.

Now and again, she’d wake up in the middle of the night. Sometimes, in the midst of that pitch-black room, she wouldn’t know where she was. Feeling like she was all alone in the world, she’d press her tear-stained face into the sheets. There were also times when she’d have a dream of running from something frightening in that forest, and she couldn’t help but feel afraid. She’d end up thinking that maybe she was still there. She’d even wonder if perhaps these happy days were just a dream she had while shivering in those woods.

But then thanks to that beloved person’s warmth and scent, she’d remember that she was safe, and that this was truly the real world.

“Hrngh... What is it, Latina?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Ah, did you have a bad dream...?”

He’d say that and then pat her head and calm her down, and everything would truly be alright. Nothing scary would happen. This was the safest place in the world, after all.

And so she thought, *I want to hurry up and become an adult, but even so, things aren’t so bad like they are now...*

5: The Platinum-haired Maiden’s Everyday Life

The first thing Latina did after waking up in the morning was tie up her hair. Her hair, which she had grown out long, was a secret point of pride for her. She never neglected to take care of it, using her favorite pomade. But it was necessary to tie it up tightly so it wouldn’t get in her way while working.

While hearing Dale’s regular breathing as he slept, Latina quickly changed behind a partition screen, as she’d grown used to doing, then went down the stairs, taking care to be quiet. After making it downstairs, she first headed to the rear of the shop. She washed her face at the washing station there, then did the laundry for her and Dale. Since she made sure to take care of things before they piled up, it didn’t take too long. She then skillfully snapped the wrinkles out of the laundry, making a satisfying sound. For some reason, it made her feel good when she made a clear, crisp *snap*.

When she returned to the kitchen, she found Kenneth carrying buckets of vegetables out of the pantry.

“Good morning.”

“Yeah, morning.”

After exchanging greetings, they sat down in front of their respective buckets. They’d done this same sort of work day in and day out for years now, so there was no need for unnecessary conversation. She still wasn’t as quick as her master, Kenneth, but she was able to properly carry out the work at a rate that wasn’t at all slow.

Latina was now fourteen years old.

She had worked at the Dancing Ocelot ever since she was young, and she now officially served as Kenneth’s right-hand woman. She was placed in charge of part of the cooking, and beside Kenneth, who was preparing a large quantity of food for the shop, she skillfully started making their own meals.

She admired that Kenneth could skillfully handle eggs in a single hand. Perhaps because her hands were small, so she couldn’t do it quite as well, so her shoulders drooped a bit.

After adding some light seasoning, she cooked them with butter until they

were soft and fluffy. It had taken quite some time for her to reach this point, where she could whistle and make an omelet in the shape she wanted without worrying about screwing up.

When she heard footsteps approaching as she was preparing the accompanying hearty soup and toast, she broke out in a smile.

“Morning, Latina.”

“Good morning, Dale!”

After seeing Dale go to wash his face, she ran off to call for Rita on the second floor. The woman already had her hands plenty full taking care of the three-year old-Theodore, and she had a second baby in her belly, so Latina thought that she really had it rough.

“Good morning Rita, Theo. It’s time for breakfast.”

“Good morning, Latina,” Rita responded with a smile while dragging a grumpy Theo out of bed. At first, Latina was surprised to see such rough interactions between the mother and son, but after observing it each and every day, she had grown used to it.

She swiftly turned around and hurried back down the stairs, wanting to spend as much of the precious time she had together with Dale before he left for work as she could. Sometimes Dale wouldn’t make it back until late at night, so if she missed him during breakfast, they wouldn’t be able to have a proper conversation that day.

“Are you exterminating magical beasts in the forest again today?”

“Yeah. I don’t have to head in too deep, so I might be back pretty early.”

They weren’t exactly wanting for money, and Dale was actually rather well off, but he continued to frequently accept work and head into the forest as a form of training, so his combat senses and skills wouldn’t dull.

It was only just recently that Dale had started to talk to her about such matters. She knew that he excelled at combat and magic, but she still held a worry in her heart. She swallowed down her emotions and forced a smile.

“Don’t push yourself, and take care.”

“I’ll be fine.”

While enjoying the smile he shot back, Latina chomped into a piece of toast with plenty of jam. She figured it was better to have a proper source of energy to make it through the busy period coming up, so she went a little heavy on it.

By the time Rita had come down the stairs, Dale and Latina had already finished breakfast. Latina took Dale’s silverware and dishes along with her own and went to rinse them off.

“Where should I start, Kenneth?”

“I’m done preparing the soup. Right now, I’ve got the potatoes simmering.”

“Got it.”

After that brief exchange with Kenneth, Latina took over work for him.

The young Theo’s parents found it extremely difficult to watch after him while eating, so they took turns taking care of him during meals. And during that time, all three of them sat happily together at the same dinner table. They were able to spend such time together because they had a trustworthy girl like Latina around to take care of the morning work.

Latina peeked inside the pot and grasped how far it the cooking had progressed. In the back of her mind, she figured out how much time was left until the potatoes would be done cooking and started working away at what she could get done before then. The large pile of onions she started chopping up were meant to be added to the scrambled eggs. As she still wasn’t fully accustomed to that task, she occasionally had to wipe away her tears as she rhythmically chopped away with her knife. Around when the bowl became filled with a mountain of finely chopped onions, the potatoes at last finished.

“Oh darkness and shadows, I order you by my name, cut loose the bonds to the celestial bodies. 〈〈Gravity reduction〉〉” She chanted the simple spell like she was humming a tune.

Latina easily picked up the big pot and emptied the contents into a colander. Enough steam shot up that her field of vision went pure white for moment. She then cut off the water, transferred the potatoes into a bowl, and started mashing them while they were still hot. She added butter partway through, mixing it in while mashing it further. With Latina’s slender arms, it was rather difficult labor. This did worry Kenneth, but the young girl insisted that it wouldn’t be “work” if she avoided all the difficult jobs.

She added milk to soften it up and then seasoned it. After checking the flavor, she carried out some of the finished mashed potatoes on a small plate to Kenneth, who had finished eating breakfast. Kenneth tasted it and then gave a single nod. She had passed. This was an everyday ritual for them, but Latina still breathed a sigh of relief.

Theo reached out towards the small plate in Kenneth’s hand. Their exchange had made the potatoes seem somehow special to the toddler, so he wanted them. Latina had expected this, so she had put more than Kenneth needed to get a taste onto the plate.

A smile naturally appeared on Latina’s face as she watched Theo mimic his

father and eat the potatoes with a solemn expression. She tried to play along with the serious boy, but she wasn't able to keep a straight face.

Latina had watched over Theo every day since he was a baby, so he was like a younger brother to her. She couldn't help but find him cute, even when he was throwing a fit.

Is this how Dale felt when he raised me?

She was well aware that Dale had given her plenty of affection.

The current her was the result of the influences of these precious people, this place, and that person whom she adored above all else.

As customers started streaming into the shop, Kenneth gave his full attention to the kitchen, while Latina took charge of manning the floor. She couldn't carry out multiple big platters at once like Kenneth could, but in exchange, she was able to squeeze through the narrow spaces between customers.

"Sorry for the wait!"

"Hey there, little lady. Looks like you're doing well today, too."

"You too, Mr. Syl."

She had a smile on her face during this exchange with the regular, and then she turned towards the neighboring table with the same expression.

"Is it alright if I take this?"

"Yeah, I don't mind."

"Excuse me."

As she was placing the empty plates on her tray, Rita called out to her.

"Excuse me, Latina! Could you go grab our stock of salves?"

"Right, got it."

After returning to the kitchen and washing off the plates, she called to Kenneth, "I'm heading to the attic for a bit to grab some medicine."

"Got it."

She climbed up the steps with a light *pitter-patter*.

This was the general sort of scene that repeated each day. Latina was always busy, but that also made it worth doing.

Once they passed the morning peak, Latina looked out into the shop's back yard.

"Theo," Latina called out.

"Sis," Theo, who had been playing, stopped and looked at her. Being called "Sis" was embarrassing, but it made her happy. When she had some free time she'd spend it hugging Theo tight and reading him a picture book or singing him a song. She'd steadily grown used to acting like a big sister.

“Thanks, Vint.”

Latina’s precious “friend” had been taking care of Theo. The races of man weren’t able to pronounce his true name, so when he suddenly popped up at the Dancing Ocelot a year ago, he had been given that nickname.

“Woof,” he replied, wagging his black tail.

Kenneth poked his head out. “Latina, could I have you go out shopping?”

“Yeah!”

As Latina had grown up, Kenneth had also started entrusting more of the shopping to her. Fresh ingredients had market prices that fluctuated daily and could be negotiated, so she only purchased those when Kenneth was with her, but it wasn’t rare at all for her to pick up items with relatively stable prices on her own.

It was like an extended errand, but even so, being counted on helped boost her confidence, and just plain made her happy.

Kenneth caught his son and scooped him up before he could cling to Latina, and Vint approached the girl’s side.

“Are you coming with me today as well?”

“Woof.”

“Thank you.”

After petting Vint’s fluffy fur, she took off her apron and slipped on a coat.

“Well then, Kenneth, we’re off!” Latina yelled out, and then started walking off with her light footsteps.

“Right. Take care.”

As he saw her off, Kenneth rocked his son back and forth as the boy squirmed in his arms. The child had always listened earnestly to the gentle, patient Latina, but that wasn’t the case for Kenneth, his father.

Accompanying Latina was a big grey “dog” with black on the tip of his wagging tail. The familiar sight of this animal wearing the outfit Latina had made for him had become somewhat famous in the area.

Kenneth thought back on how much of a hassle it had been when this “dog” first showed up in Kreuz nearly a year ago.

The beast had suddenly showed up without notice at the Dancing Ocelot one day when few customers were around. He looked like a wolf with wings. There were a number of folks in the Ocelot who would immediately realize just what he was, so it could easily erupt into a disturbance. You didn’t run into mythical beasts very often to begin with, so nobody would’ve imagined finding one strolling through town.

Wondering how the gatekeepers and lookouts had missed him, Dale looked into it later and found out that the wolf cub had apparently found a small crack to squeeze through in the town wall. If he were full-grown, it wouldn't have been a possible entrance. This was a big oversight caused by the way that the repair had been put off because of the cost, since there hadn't been any serious incidents as of late. Dale obviously urgently pressed the matter so it could be addressed.

Following a scent, the cub had gotten all the way to the Ocelot without getting lost. It was early morning, so he hadn't been spotted and it didn't turn into a panic. That made it all of a more surprise for those inside the shop.

"What's it doing in a place like this?"

Paying no heed to the regulars who were on guard, Latina bent down, scooped up the grey-furred animal, and tilted her head.

"Get away from it, little lady!" Sylvester shouted bitterly. As a skilled veteran adventurer, he was intimately familiar with the mythical beasts known as soaring wolves.

With the grey animal still in her arms, Latina tilted her head at the sight of the customers all putting their hands on their weapons and said, "Um, he's my friend. He probably came here to see me."

"Y-Your friend, little lady...?"

"Latina, smell, came."

The customers were already surprised by Latina's statement, and when the mythical beast uttered her name, that shock only grew.

"So you came from the mountains? I'd imagine everyone must be worried if you came without asking. Is it alright?"

Despite being the center of attention, Latina continued the conversation at her own pace. The regulars all just barely managed to hold back a retort of, "No, that's not really the problem here."

"Fine. Go, Latina. Told okay."

"I see. Then I guess it's alright."

Dripping sweat, the large men thought, *No it's not!* in their hearts, but Latina didn't notice. With a grim look, Sylvester faced Kenneth, who had at last poked his face out of the kitchen, and said, "Kenneth, that's..."

"Ah, Dale mentioned that to me before. He said that Latina had tamed a pack of soaring wolves living near his home village..."

"The little lady did what?!"

Even an experienced veteran like him was left dumbfounded. His voice even shot up a pitch.

“Still, a soaring wolf is a little...”

“Yeah, that’s a problem.”

Sylvester and Kenneth nodded to one another.

Soaring wolves were mythical beasts that lived in packs, with a strong sense of camaraderie. It wouldn’t be hard to deal with this single cub, but if they made a poor move, then the whole of the pack could end up coming after them for revenge. The possibility of that certainly wasn’t slim. After all, the cub had informed them of where it was heading before coming to this town. It said it had followed Latina’s scent here, which sounded ridiculous, but it was possible that the other soaring wolves could use the same method.

“It was a long way here though, right?”

“Croots wasn’t far. Slept once, arrived.”

Traveling by land like Dale and Latina had once done required a big detour, so it took close to a month. But for a soaring wolf that could fly through the skies, it could apparently be done in two days and one night. And he was still just a cub. It was hard to imagine just how quickly a full-grown adult could make the trip.

The scent he’d followed wasn’t the one left on the road. He didn’t follow the path Latina had taken, so he’d tracked her smell through the air. It may have been one of the magical abilities of this mythical beast.

Kenneth and Sylvester looked at one another once more and contemplated.

“It seems he really is attached to the little lady...”

As the mythical beast wagged his tail and snuggled his head up against Latina, he looked just like a well-tamed dog.

“We’ll have to consult with Dale... but letting Latina keep him may be the safest option.”

Sylvester’s expression grew even more strained at Kenneth’s words, but he wasn’t able to deny them.

Let sleeping dogs, etc. And besides, Latina wasn’t the sort to abuse having a mythical beast around.

“I’ll have a word with him...” Sylvester wrung out after a long silence.

“We’re having an emergency meeting! Spread the word!” Sylvester loudly ordered to the adventurers by his side, and seemingly understanding the meaning, several of them left the Ocelot. Apparently those words were meant to be conveyed to someone elsewhere.

Kenneth figured he shouldn’t butt in and ask just what sort of meeting that was.

When Dale finally returned home from work, he found his adorable adopted daughter standing beside a single animal wearing clothes.

“Welcome home, Dale.”

“Woof.”

Latina’s smile was cute, but what was with that unnatural, forced-sounding “Woof”?

“L-Latina...?”

“Hmm?”

“That’s...”

“Um, he’s a dog. Don’t worry about it, he’s just a dog!”

“Woof.”

“U-Um...”

With a troubled look on his face, Dale glanced to Kenneth for help, only for his big bro to also give a firm nod.

“She says he’s a dog, so he’s a dog.”

“Woof.”

“Hey...”

“It’s not strange at all to have a pet dog in town. So he’s a dog.”

Turning away from the reality of the situation, the “dog” wondered in the back of his mind just why being called an animal had made him angry, but he didn’t seem to mind getting called a dog at all.

People tended to grow used to things once they heard the circumstances and got past the initial confusion. Over time, even the extraordinary tends to blend into the ordinary, everyday scenery.

The title of “mythical beast” wasn’t just for show, as he was an extremely clever animal, so he didn’t require any “training.” Latina taught him many rules, and he remembered them all without any trouble. Latina handled his bedding and food, but he didn’t require any help outside of that, and Latina was happy for the physical contact of brushing and petting.

On top of all that, he also helped out with watching Theo. Perhaps because he’d grown up in a pack, he was good at taking care of small creatures.

Vint’s greatest job, though, was guarding Latina.

†

She’d been cute ever since she was little, and as she had grown, that adorableness had only grown more and more polished. Her young body still

looked a little more childish when compared to other girls her age. However, that only added to her growing beauty, giving her a charm that adults couldn't match.

Her grown-out hair reached down to her hips, with part of it braided to hide her broken horns, and it gave off a brilliant, platinum shine. Her face now also looked a bit more adult, so she appeared not just cute, but beautiful as well.

In Laband, one came of age when they turned eighteen. That didn't mean that was the precise age they became an "adult," but generally by that point, they were employed and were thought of as being of marriageable age. Depending on one's position, however, their circumstances could be rather different. In Dale's village, you came of age at fifteen, and out in the country it wasn't rare to hear of girls that age becoming brides. It was also completely normal in noble society for girls who still hadn't fully matured to get forced into political marriages. And though people in towns like Kreuz tended to get married later, it wasn't like such things never happened.

As a result, Latina was already plenty old enough to be looked at in "that way." However, she wasn't very aware of the danger that she faced because of it.

Being such a doting idiot, Dale was desperate to protect her, like he was wrapping her up in multiple layers of silk cushioning. And in the Dancing Ocelot, her master, Kenneth, always kept a close eye on her, alongside scowling adventurers and elite guardsmen. Obviously, nobody was foolish enough to make a move on her under such circumstances, and as a result, she didn't think of herself as a beauty.

She'd say with a smile, "I mean, Dale always says that I'm cute." She'd been told that too often, so she didn't think of it as an honest evaluation.

"I've talked with my friends about boys... you know, dating and confessions and stuff. But I've never gotten along with boys like that... We're just friends, right?"

Latina was something of an airhead. And amongst those who were interested in her, even young adventurers were intimidated by the guardians behind her, so the best they could manage with her was awkward idle chatter. Latina had never had a member of the other sex openly express interest in her.

When it came to those who were popular with the other sex and those who weren't, Latina was in the latter. She was like an untouchable flower on a high pedestal, so they didn't even think of approaching her. As a result of these circumstances, Latina came to think of herself as a girl who wasn't popular with the boys.

The influence of her "guardians" covered nearly all of Kreuz, but it wasn't

perfect. The people around her couldn’t help but worry that at some point, she’d be placed in some sort of danger.

That was especially true of a particular doting idiot.

“On the off chance that something were to happen to Latina, some lukewarm punishment like death wouldn’t be enough.”

It had become part of Dale’s daily routine as of late to threaten young adventurers visiting the Ocelot while wearing a smile on his face. That still wasn’t enough for him, though.

“I mean, Latina’s just so, so, so, soooo cute! I’m just so terribly worried that some insect or vermin will approach her!”

Normally Rita would just brush off Dale when he was like that, but she agreed on that point.

“That’s for sure. Latina’s just too gentle and tends to let her guard down, so I worry about her.”

“Right?! But that’s part of what makes her cute, too!”

Apparently the “puppy” felt the same way as Latina’s guardians.

“Latina, together, go.”

“Really? Thanks for always helping out.”

He’d carry bags and the like in addition to walking with her, so Latina thought of him as always just helping out. But everyone else saw him as clearly being her bodyguard and chaperone.

Accompanied by that “chaperone,” Latina headed for the commercial sector, the eastern district. They went around to several shops where they were already familiar faces and picked up what Kenneth requested.

Afterwards, they headed towards the crafting district. Right now, it wasn’t too busy of a period for the Ocelot. Kenneth had expected them to take a bit of a detour when he sent Latina out shopping.

Now that all of her friends had their own separate lifestyles, they spent much less time together compared to when they all commuted to school at the temple of Asfar. But it wasn’t as if they never hung out. Latina occasionally imposed on Kenneth’s kindness and visited her friends’ homes like this.

Following after her mother, Chloe now tailored for her family business. She still wasn’t as skilled as her mom, but she was now talented enough to sew a garment by herself from start to finish.

“Chloe, about our next day off...”

Latina had come to see Chloe, tea cakes in hand. More than being a gift, these snacks were just something she wanted to eat. Realizing that, Chloe placed

her work tools off to the side and created a space for drinking tea. Latina then calmly opened up the bundle she had brought.

“Is it alright? Weren’t you worried just the other day that you’ve gotten a little fatter?”

Latina pouted a bit in response to Chloe’s teasing. “It’s fine. I won’t overeat, and I’ll be moving around a lot after this.”

She rubbed her upper arm while she said that, perhaps because she really was worried about it. From Chloe’s point of view, Latina didn’t have any unnecessary fat on her body, but the girl was still quite sensitive.

As Latina sat with the plate of cookies she had brought in front of her, complex feelings were written on her face. Unable to stand it any longer, Chloe blurted out, “It’d be good for you to put on a little more weight, don’t you think? Those parts you’re so worried about won’t get bigger if you keep acting like that.”

“I’m just growing up slower than everyone.”

Her friends had now reached the age when they were starting to gradually gain some more grown-up curves to their bodies. In comparison, while Latina may have grown taller, she still had a flat, young-looking appearance, which was a present source of concern for her.

“I’ve started to get bigger, at least a little!”

In spite of her desperate assertion, it was impossible to confirm any such growth, at least from what could be seen through her clothing. Knowing full well that if they continued on this topic Latina would end up in tears, Chloe quickly decided to shift the discussion.

“So, what was that about our next day off?”

“Ah, that’s right. Sylvia said she’ll be able to take off, too.”

“You may work at the Ocelot, but... isn’t it a problem for Sylvia to use the message board to contact you?”

“I don’t know... Sylvia said, ‘If they won’t let me do that much, then I can’t keep on staying here!’ but... It must be rough, serving at the temple.”

The duty of priests at the temple of Akhdar, where Sylvia served, was to gather information, which greatly affected those who possessed the divine protection of Akhdar, the guardian deity of travelers, and were naturally strongly drawn to seek out unknown places and information.

It was the job of those who served the temple to manage the information they gathered and spread it the world over depending on the circumstances. The temples also shouldered the task of training those priests who wished to gather

information by traveling. As one such trainee, Sylvia spent her days studying and practicing.

The Dancing Ocelot was equipped with a terminal known as an Akhdar's message board, making it a temple branch office in a way. Because it had deep ties to the temple, occasionally priests would come visit. And so, Latina was able to hear about Sylvia, who was an apprentice priestess, through the grapevine.

But that wasn't all. Latina had no idea how she was doing it, but Sylvia used the Akhdar message board to send her personal messages. Sylvia's divine protection wasn't overly strong, nor was it specialized, but it seemed she was quite resourceful.

Thinking back on their old friend from their school days, Latina and Chloe exchanged awkward smiles.

"I'm really looking forward to the Ahmar night festival!" Latina said excitedly to her friend.

In Kreuz, there were festivals and events held all throughout the year. There were some sponsored by the local lord and by the industry and commercial committee of the eastern district, but the greatest of them all was the night festival held by the temple dedicated to the principal god of Laband, Ahmar.

Other events like the harvest festival held by the temple of Quirmizi and the mass held by the temple of Niili were also important for the people of the city, but they couldn't hope to compete in terms of scale.

Latina had gone to see the festival with Dale each year, but this was the first time she was given permission to go with her friends. But the doting idiot was apparently still worried about having given the okay, as he butted in when Latina and her friends were making plans enough that mere "nagging" didn't cover it.

He'd say that she definitely shouldn't do anything on her own. That they shouldn't go down roads where there aren't many people around. That she shouldn't get too excited while walking around and eating and wreck her stomach. That she shouldn't let her guard down when men she didn't know approached her. Actually, he wouldn't mind if she used attack magic to drive them away. After all, victory goes to the one who makes the first move. See strange men, and ones who aren't strange too, as enemies, and attack them all! Got it?! And so on.

"I think the guards would get mad if I did that, Dale," Latina objected, staring straight at Dale with her grey eyes.

"No, you see, survival of the fittest is the way of the world. You need to be prepared for that," Dale responded, without even a shred of hesitation.

From his overly extreme reaction, Latina figured Dale was worrying too much.

And those around them figured that Dale was going too far, but also that it was only natural that he was worried.

Her lack of awareness only stirred up Dale's worries further, so his reaction towards Latina naturally grew more and more extreme. As a result, Latina tended to not pay serious attention to what he was saying at such times, creating a spiral.

While enjoying the cookies topped with caramelized nuts, Latina looked over at the clothing that Chloe was in the middle of sewing. "What do you think? Will it suit me?"

"You've given it a look plenty of times since back when I was still picking out fabrics, haven't you?"

"Still, I'm looking forward to when it's finished," she said with a shy giggle, as she was the one who had ordered it.

It was only natural for a girl to want to have new clothes to wear for the night festival she was anticipating so much.

"I'm letting you make all the choices, so it's different than usual. My heart's all aflutter."

"So you're nervous with me making the decisions?" Chloe forced a sulky expression. Latina knew that she didn't mean it, though.

"I mean, I wouldn't pick this sort of color..."

"You're too focused on the extremes! You like childish, frilly stuff, but then when you want to wear something more grown-up, you aim for something sexy that doesn't suit you," Chloe said with both hands on her hips, mixing in a sigh.

"But..."

"No buts! You need to wear something that suits you! You should wear more clothing with a chic color and cut like this."

It was no surprise that Chloe wanted to sigh. As someone that made a living creating clothes, she was sensitive to the current trends and designs. Much of her work did involve sewing goods that were ordered in the main shop, but it was also a harsh business where she ended up often making pieces that couldn't be sold. Chloe felt that her friend was absurdly beautiful, and if she'd just dress up, it'd make both her and the clothes to truly shine.

And yet, Latina preferred to stick to the same loose, flowing outfits she always wore. Well, that was fine. That sort of clothing did indeed suit her friend. The problem, though, was when Latina wanted to rebel against her own childish

tastes and sought out more mature clothing. That wasn't a bad thing in and of itself. But for whatever reason, at such times, Latina would reach for sexy clothing of the sort that only even a select few adults could pull off. Latina had a childish figure even amongst girls her own age, so such clothes didn't suit her at all. Perhaps several years in the future she'd have the sort of womanly form she wanted and it'd be a different story, but at least for now, it just didn't work.

As someone who made a living in the world of clothing, Chloe couldn't overlook something like that. And so, Chloe took supervision in the creation of these new clothes for Latina. She went with a flowing cut with some ornamentation, but she kept the design simple so that wouldn't be overwhelming. So the lace wouldn't appear too childish, she used high-quality black material, and she matched it with a chic color so Latina's platinum hair would stand out better. It may not have been an "adult" outfit, but it was a design that suited Latina's current age splendidly. Chloe had quite a bit of confidence in her choice. She was certain that her best friend wouldn't lose out to any young ladies from the western district, nor the princesses from the northern district.

"Hopefully the person you want to show it to most will be surprised."

With that single sentence, Chloe made Latina turn red all the way to her earlobes. She'd known of her friend's crush ever since they were young, so Chloe gave the job her all.

After enjoying some time together with her friend, Latina stood up from her seat and said farewell to Chloe. As she went to leave the house, she found Vint lying on his stomach to the side of the entryway, his eyes closed. He shot awake and looked up at her.

"Sorry for making you wait."

He responded back by wagging his tail.

Shortly after the two of them started walking, Latina noticed a young woman. What drew her eyes was her attire, which looked to be that of a traveler. You didn't see travelers very often in this part of town. This may have been part of the commercial eastern district, but everyone but townsfolk and some of the adventurers tended to utilize the main shops.

"Are you lost?"

"Woof?"

Latina whispered because she had once gotten lost in that area and remembered how terribly helpless she'd felt. The layout of the streets was so complex that it was practically a labyrinth. It was understandable.

The woman had stopped in place and was glancing all around. From her

actions, Latina figured she had guessed correctly.

“Um... do you need help?”

“Huh?”

The woman’s dark chestnut-colored hair swayed as she turned her head in response to Latina’s words. The second she saw her face, Latina’s mouth shot wide open.

Wow... She’s so pretty...

The woman seemed surprised by something as well, but Latina didn’t notice that and instead thought, *Hmm...? Have I seen her somewhere before...?*

While lost in thought, she happened to see the woman’s dark, deep-blue eyes. In that moment, she remembered.

“The Rose...”

“Oh, my! You’re the Fairy Princess, aren’t you?!”

Latina couldn’t help but jump up a bit at being called that by someone she was meeting for the first time.

“Gwah?!”

After letting out that pathetic cry, she looked over the woman before her. She was a bit older than Latina and was very pretty, with a gentle-looking face. The indigo-blue eyes underneath her long eyelashes sparkled mischievously. She had a slender, delicate, and dainty appearance, but she didn’t give off the impression of some sheltered noble.

That’s right. She was the daughter of a noble family.

Her signature hair color was different from when Latina had last seen the woman, but that was most likely because she was hiding it. Looking at her again with that in mind, Latina saw that her chestnut hair looked unnatural, but she recognized her face and the color of her eyes.

What sort of joke was it, for a noble to be calling a commoner like her a “princess”?

As the woman brought her pale, slender hands to her chest and smiled, Latina was awash in confusion. As if that unrest had been conveyed to the woman, her smile only grew wider with Latina’s bewilderment. Her gentle eyes only left more and more of an impression.

“It’s embarrassing, so... could you please not call me that...?” Latina managed to squeeze out.

“Ah, I’m sorry for being so rude. It’s just that you were even more adorable than the rumors said, so I unthinkingly—”

“Ah! D-Dale... He spread that elsewhere...?” Latina clasped both hands to her cheeks and felt a clear warmth rising through them.

She knew that the regulars who doted on her gave her the nickname of “Fairy Princess.” She was still just considered a “squirt” around the shop. So she understood how she got called “little lady” or “princess” there.

Dale had indeed said that this woman was an acquaintance of his friend. So that meant he must have used that nickname while talking with that friend. Just what had he said? Whatever it was, it was surely embarrassing.

“You’re the Rose Princess, right...?”

“Oh, my... you know of me?”

Since she responded with a smile, it would seem that Latina hadn’t been wrong. After deciding that, Latina looked over her surroundings a few times, not seeing anyone accompanying the woman.

“I saw you once before. Are you all alone...?”

The woman silently stared back in response to Latina’s question. Looking into her gentle eyes that were like a portal to the depths of her heart, it was clear she was unnerved.

“Yes. I’m unfamiliar with this town, and I seem to have taken the wrong gate. It would be quickest to ask you, I’d say. Could you please lead me to where Sir Dale Reki is?”

Latina soon realized that something was off. She got the feeling that Rose was here because something terrible had happened. But with that said, she couldn’t think of any reason to refuse. After a few seconds of silence, Latina forced a smile.

“Dale should be out for work right now. For the time being, I’ll show you to the shop he’s based out of, alright?”

“Thank you very much.”

While smiling back at the grinning Rose Princess, Latina bent over. She quietly whispered to Vint at her side, saying, “Vint, tell Kenneth about this. I’ll be alright.”

“Woof?”

“After that, could you look for Dale? He should be in the forest to the south.”

“Woof.”

Before heading out, Vint rubbed his tail up against Latina, as if to say that he’d take care of it properly, causing the girl to break out in a slightly awkward

smile.

The forest to the south of Kreuz was pretty much a playground to Vint. He'd occasionally slip out of the town and head there to play around. Because the pup was rather mischievous when he played, Dale earnestly warned Vint early on that adventurers could end up finding out and trying to exterminate him. Because he added "If that happened, Latina would break down in tears," Vint abided by his warning and played deep in the forest, far from town.

She didn't know exactly where Dale was in the forest, so it was quickest to ask Vint to handle it, with his powerful sense of smell.

"What a strange animal."

"He's a really clever one."

As she responded, Latina looked at their surroundings again. She was looking for something different this time around, worrying about the possibility of someone watching them. For now, though, it seemed they were safe.

"I think it was a good thing that you entered through the eastern gate. There are a lot of unscrupulous people around the southern gate. Shall we take the main street there...? Or would you prefer to avoid being seen?"

"Oh, my..." the woman said in surprise, and then broke out in a gentle smile once more.

"I gave my pursuers the slip, so I think it should be fine, but it's probably best to avoid being seen by too many people."

It seemed that something bad really had happened.

With the smile plastered on Latina's face growing a bit stiff, she guided the Rose Princess and headed back.

Kenneth was waiting for them in front of the Ocelot, looking astounded.

"You sure came back from your errands with an unexpected souvenir..."

It was clear that Vint had carried out his duty and told Kenneth in advance.

"Did Vint head out?"

"Yeah. He never listens to anyone but you, so it's a good thing you told him to do that."

Kenneth apparently also thought it was the right choice to call Dale back, which affirmed Latina's decision.

"For now, come inside. It's empty right now."

"I understand. This way, please..."

"Thank you."

As the Rose Princess said that with a smile, she showed no sign of displeasure at stepping into a shop like the Dancing Ocelot, which decidedly

didn’t have the atmosphere of a first-rate establishment.

She looked beautiful as she sat up straight in a hard wooden chair, but it wasn’t fitting to the image of a noble lady.

“I should tell you about myself before Sir Dale Reki returns, yes? My apologies for being so late in offering my name. I am Rose Cornelius. The house of Cornelius possesses both territory and rank in the court, but my personal position is that of a priestess of Niili, so please do not worry about formalities.” Rose said that with a smile, and it was clear that she was a friendly, gentle woman. The temple of Niili opened its doors to the folks about town, also treating the sick and injured. Rose’s approachable, affectionate nature, which was entirely unlike that of other nobles, may have been a result of having worked there.

“I’ve heard of you. You’re famed for being a priestess with an extraordinarily high level of divine protection.”

“It’s nothing so amazing. I was just born with something unusual, so I stand out, for better or worse,” she said, touching her dark-chestnut hair. It was apparently a wig. “In exchange, though, no one will recognize me as long as I hide that,” she said with a mischievous giggle.

“What business do you have with Dale...?”

“I want to entrust him with a message, since I am not acquainted with the count who is the lord of this town.”

Though Latina was a bundle of wariness, Rose didn’t show any discomfort as she responded. She was calm and composed beyond her years.

“Why Dale in particular? For starters, you’re not exactly in a position to be gallivanting about on your own.” There was wariness in Kenneth’s voice as well as he said that. Accepting that as only natural, Rose quietly responded, “I was with the Second Demon Lord just the other day.”

With those words, it wasn’t just Latina, but also Kenneth who was left unable to speak. The Second Demon Lord was infamous for being even more brutal and dangerous than the other six.

However, Rose didn’t explain any further and remained silent. And considering the circumstances, Kenneth didn’t try to draw any more information out of her. Since a demon lord was involved, it made sense to leave things up to Dale. So Kenneth put a close on the topic and asked Latina to prepare some tea.

Having been visibly shaken, it took Latina longer than she needed to finish preparing the tea, despite it being something she had done many times before and was quite accustomed to. She remained silent when she brought out the tea

set before Rose and poured out a cup, an aromatic steam rising off of it. This awkward silence continued on for a while, until Dale and Vint returned together.

As soon as Dale saw Rose quietly sipping away at a cup of tea in the back of the Dancing Ocelot, he let out a hysterical “Rose...?!” That reaction was only natural, as Vint hadn’t told him the details. Vint paid Dale no mind and continued on in at his own pace, then rubbed his head up against Latina. He seemed to want to be praised.

“Thank you, Vint. Welcome back, Dale. Um, I’m still not clear on the details, but I ended up running into Lady Rose...”

“That explanation doesn’t really tell me anything...”

Latina was crouched down and petting Vint as she looked up at Dale. She tilted her head a bit.

Unsure as to act towards Dale, Rose stood up and gave him an informal bow. It was just a casual gesture, but there was a polish to it. She was dressed in dusty traveling clothes, but it was clear that she was a part of the upper echelons of society.

“It’s been a long time, Sir Dale.”

The two knew each other through the ducal Eldstedt family. When Latina and Dale were returning home from their trip and passed by her in the port town, Rose had been on her way to the duke’s estate. When Dale had gone to the capital for work afterwards, he ran into her there. He had lost a chance to tease his friend, but in exchange got to see the normally straight-faced man act terribly embarrassed in front of her.

“Right... What are you doing here?”

“Despite appearances, I am in trouble... Allow me to get straight to the point. I was kidnapped just the other day.”

It was an explosive statement.

“Huh? Bwah?!” Dale let out a strange exclamation. Latina, meanwhile, was too shocked to make a sound. Vint kept on wagging his tail, doing his own thing.

“B-By the Second Demon Lord...?” Latina whispered the name that Rose had uttered, but the woman shook her head in response.

“No. It was another group that kidnapped me, but it will be difficult to investigate who they were at this point. The Second Demon Lord killed them all.”

“How... are you alright, Lady Rose?” Latina asked, her voice stiff.

Ever since she was young, this was how she acted when the topic of the Second Demon Lord came up. To those who lived in Vassilios, the country of the

First Demon Lord, the Second Demon Lord was a hated enemy who had killed their king. Dale figured that may have been why.

“A whim, it would seem. I have a mana trait... and the Second Demon Lord found that amusing.”

“And you were released after that, with nothing done to you?”

“A close aide of the Second Demon Lord let me go. I know nothing of the specifics... but it seemed that she did not have much loyalty towards her master...”

“The Second Demon Lord’s demons are ruled by fear. They’re slaves, and toys. It’s not like the First Demon Lord, who welcomed the people who helped him out as his demons and lived together with them...” Latina responded in monotone with a sigh, wearing a stiff expression.

“Latina?”

“The Second Demon Lord is scary. When she killed the First Demon Lord a long time ago, it was just because she thought it was interesting to kill someone who wouldn’t die so easily.”

“Why do you know that...?”

Latina blinked once in response to Dale’s question, and her expression returned to normal. She looked up at him and appeared just a bit sad.

“I was told it a while back, where I was born. They said the Second Demon Lord was really scary, so I had to be careful. That if I ran into her I may be killed, so I needed to make sure to hide.”

“Did your father tell you that...?”

“It wasn’t just Rag. When it came to talking about the demon lord... my mother actually told me more.”

“The person who let me go said something similar,” Rose said, then looked at Dale once more. “Because of the circumstances, I could not carelessly let my own whereabouts become publicly known. I thought of you and made it to this town, Sir Dale, but I did not know exactly where you were, so I was troubled. But then, the Fairy Princess showed up and helped me.”

“Dale...”

Hearing Rose use that nickname again, Latina glared straight at Dale. Breaking out in a bit of a cold sweat, he averted his gaze.

Lately, when he’d shout out loudly about how cute his daughter was, Latina would react like she was annoyed. It may just be that she’d grown up, but it still made him feel somehow lonely. As a result, he’d lately been bragging about Latina when she wasn’t around, along with his usual intimidation and threats. He

had absolutely no intention of restraining himself, though. He didn't feel like mending his ways at all.

Rose had no way of knowing what Dale was thinking and kept on talking as before.

"I still do not know who was behind the people who kidnapped me, so I did not know who to turn to... so I came to you, Sir Dale."

"R-Right. If that's the case, then he must be worried out of his mind... Even if you send a letter right away, it'll still take a number of days until a response comes, right? What'll you do till then?"

"If you could recommend a place to me, then I will head there. There should be quite a few inns that serve travelers in this town, yes?"

"I'm not all that familiar with any high-class sort of places I could recommend to you..."

Dale personally only ever used the Dancing Ocelot, so he had no need to know all that much about the other inns in Kreuz.

"Oh, my. I don't have much on me, so a cheap inn would actually be a big help. Those are the sort of places I stayed in on my way here," Rose said, letting loose that preposterous statement with a smile.

"Rose..." Dale said with a sigh.

"Wow..." Latina said, so thrown for a loop that she was unable to hold back her usual utterance. It seemed Latina was trying to correct that childish habit lately, but despite her efforts, it still slipped out when she was shaken, so it was hard to see much change.

That's fine. It's cute, after all, Dale thought.

"I can't imagine what he'd do if you did something rash..."

"Well, I was kidnapped, so I obviously did not have the money on hand. I mimicked what you adventurers do and earned some traveling expenses, but that was not steady..."

"W-Wait... Rose?! What did you do?"

"I took on jobs in the towns along the way. You know, exterminating magical beasts and then selling their remains. That is how I got the money to make it here. Is that so odd?"

"U-Um... Dale?" Latina cut in, no longer able to hold back. She was visibly perplexed. "Lady Rose is... a princess, right...?"

"Well, she's the daughter of a noble..."

"What is it?" Rose asked with an innocent smile. From her appearance and demeanor, her nickname "princess" seemed totally fitting. But underneath that, it

seemed she was rather different.

“You didn’t run into any trouble along the way?”

“Do not worry, Sir Dale. I silenced all those ruffians.”

That utterance caused nothing *but* worry.

“The general opinion is that magic users can’t handle close-range combat, but when you have as much excess mana as I do, you can chain together simple chants to get by.”

Dale also didn’t have to worry about his available mana when casting magic, thanks to his divine protection, so he understood what she was saying. He could also pump a great deal of mana into simple spells to raise their effectiveness, which would normally be terribly inefficient, allowing him to use their quick activation speed to bulldoze through his foes.

Even so, it felt quite unfitting to hear such a statement from a frail-looking woman.

Rose was an acquaintance of Dale’s, but it was only through his friend, so they weren’t all that close. He didn’t think she was a woman of such decisive action. It was just too much of a betrayal of her outward appearance.

I knew she was an outstanding magic user, but... he thought, along with a sigh.

“In that case, since you’re here, you should stay at the Ocelot... That’s fine, right, Kenneth?”

“I should be able to get her a room, but I can’t do anything about the customers around her.”

“It’s better than letting her go to some other inn... And if he heard I took my eyes off of her, he’d totally kill me...”

Even Dale recognized his friend’s skill. He’d prefer to avoid angering him and ending up in a quarrel.

“Do I have enough money to cover it?”

“I can at least cover that much...”

The Rose Princess with a commoner’s view on money broke out in a brilliant smile suiting her nickname.

After all of that, Rose ended up staying in a room at the Ocelot. She hardly ever left the room, likely because she understood the position she was in. When she did occasionally leave, she always wore her chestnut-colored wig.

She couldn’t use a public bathhouse thanks to the circumstances, so she instead made use of the simple bath in the rear of the Ocelot. Under Latina’s orders, Vint kept a close watch, so Rose felt safe and secure, not fearing any

reprehensible men approaching.

Despite how restricted and restrained she was, Rose didn't complain at all. However, she found putting her wig on over her wet hair unpleasant and wasn't able to accept that. As a result, her long, brilliant, rose-pink hair was on full display as she dried it. When she did so, though, she made sure she was in a place where people wouldn't see. Her hair stood out far too much; it was where her nickname came from, after all.

At first she'd do this in the back of the kitchen, but she soon moved instead to Dale's room in the attic in order to teach Latina, as the woman was an excellent magic user. It seemed Rose had grown bored of spending day after day shut away in her room. As Latina took everything she was taught seriously, Rose grew more and more passionate about teaching her.

Putting it another way, though, Rose was an unexpectedly intense teacher. Up until now, Latina had only studied under more relaxed teaching methods. It was that way back when she went to school, and when Dale taught her magic, and when she learned from Master Cornelio in Tislow.

Rose, however, was harsh. She wasn't unreasonably strict, but she demanded discipline from both herself and others when it came to wielding the great power known as magic.

Currently, Latina was sitting up straight as Rose read over the report the girl had written for the homework she assigned yesterday.

"I see. It seems you really do not have any problem when it comes to the basic theories, Latina."

Normally Rose had a calm, gentle air about her, but when she was offering critique, the person receiving it couldn't help but correct their posture. That was proof of just how serious Rose was when it came to teaching magic.

"Even if you are a devil, you were driven out of your village when you were still very young, yes, Latina? Your comprehension of complex words seems quite high, considering that."

"Really? Maybe... it's because the adults around me were very strict when it came to words...?" Latina was much less formal towards Rose than she had been at first. Latina's friendly personality was the main reason for that, and Rose didn't have any issue with her doing so. More than friends, they felt like sisters, with Rose gladly helping to look after Latina.

The decisive difference between Dale and Rose was that she was openly strict when she needed to be.

In summary, Latina and Rose generally got along well.

“In comparison, you do not seem to know many attack magic techniques.”

“Right. Dale said they were dangerous and I didn’t need to know them, so he didn’t teach me.”

“For people like us, who cannot match up to others in terms of physical strength, magic is an important means of self-defense. It is true that it can be dangerous if you use it wrong, but that only makes it all the more important that you have a deep understanding of it and know how to use it properly.”

The fact that Rose and Latina both shared the same affinities for Holy and Dark magic was also a big reason that Rose was such a perfect teacher for the girl, as the magic they could use was the same. Because Dale’s affinities were for Earth, Water, and Dark, he didn’t have anything but basic knowledge of Holy magic or Holy and Dark combination magic.

“Your specialty is mana control, so I think that increasing the number of spells you have to choose from depending on the situation may actually lower the danger.”

Latina’s mana control stood out even to a magic expert like Rose.

“Right!” responded Latina with a stern expression, looking overly serious. Perhaps thanks to her nature, though, she still looked adorable.

“Lady Rose, Purification magic is Holy magic, right?”

“That is correct. You can use Dark magic to deal with undead creatures too, but...”

“I’d be grateful if you’d teach me... I don’t think I can handle that Dark magic...”

Latina had made the request because ever since she was young, she hated undead creatures. She had bad memories of an encounter with undead monsters when she was little, which had developed into a bit of trauma.

It was Holy and Dark magic that could be used against the undead. Dale only had access to Dark magic, so his anti-undead method was to combine that with physical attacks. That meant it required getting up close and personal to undead monsters and striking them. Latina wanted to know how to deal with them because she found them frightening, so that method was just too difficult to handle.

“I think you could manage expanding the range enough to take out several at once.”

“Really?! I’ll try my best to learn it!”

Latina strived hard at the magic training in order to overcome her trauma.

Seeing Latina so happily have that magic training driven into her, Dale felt

the need to ask her a question one day at dinner.

“Hey, Latina...”

“What is it?”

“You’re striving so hard to learn that magic, but... you’re not planning on becoming an adventurer in the future, right?”

He was nervous. He wouldn’t say she was a first-rate magic user just yet, but her skills were certainly above average from what he could tell. She would be plenty capable of handling being an adventurer if she wanted to, but he didn’t want her doing such a worrying, dangerous job. As a parent, that was only natural.

“Huh? Umm... I think that I’d like to run a restaurant like the Ocelot. But I’d also like to go on a journey again, to see towns and places I’ve never seen before... and I’d like to see Granny and Maya again, too.”

Dale breathed a sigh of relief.

“In the past, I used to think that I’d like to join you on your work, Dale...” Latina said, wearing a slightly troubled and lonely smile.

“Huh?” Dale was taken aback.

“I hated being left behind... so I thought, if I could just go with you on your work, I wouldn’t have to worry about that, right?” said Latina with a laugh. Knowing that he had made her endure all that since she was young, Dale looked troubled.

“I’m sorry...”

“Not at all. I don’t want to trouble you.” After giggling and making a smile to glaze over the matter, her expression suddenly grew serious. “But now that I’ve grown up, I’ve come to realize that isn’t possible for me.”

“Huh?”

“If I *did* accompany you on your work... I’d just be in the way. So I decided I’d hold down the fort instead.”

“I’d say you’re pretty skilled as a magic user, Latina. You don’t need to put yourself down like that...”

Though he didn’t want her to be an adventurer, he spoke out against what she’d said because he didn’t want her self-image to be so bad. More than anything else, he wanted her to consider herself valuable.

“No, I’ve come to really understand just how amazing you are, Dale. I don’t have all that much mana, or any great power to protect you with. And if things got really dangerous, I know that you’d worry more about me than yourself.”

“Of course I would!” Dale immediately responded. Latina smiled at her

guardian’s expected reaction.

“See? That’s why I can’t help out with your work.”

Dale knew that he made her put up with a lot and feel lonely. But Latina had been so understanding and clever even when she was young that she’d been shielding him from that.

“I’m sure you understand, Latina...”

“Hmm?”

“Hearing you greet me with a ‘Welcome home’ makes me so very happy.”

After her shock at Dale’s words faded, a gentle smile crossed Latina’s face. “Yeah... that’s right. A place where someone tells you ‘Welcome home’ is precious.”

“Yup. So you *are* my source of power...”

While he felt relieved by Latina’s bright expression, in the depths of his heart he thought, *She really has been paying attention to all sorts of things...*

He let out a slightly worried sigh, wondering why there was still so much she was blind to about herself.

6: The Young Man’s Time with the Infant and the Rose Princess’s Calamity

As the Ahmar night festival approached, the whole of Kreuz grew awash in a bustling and restless atmosphere. It was the foremost celebration for the town. Every shop was working hard to prepare themselves to target the travelers visiting for the festival. The number of adventurers visiting to guard the merchants coming for the festivities grew too, so the Dancing Ocelot was even busier than normal.

“Sis! Big sis Latina!”

“What is it, Theo?”

“Let’s play,” the young Theodore said in the backyard of the Ocelot, but Latina made a slightly troubled face. Currently, she held a mountain of the sheets used in the Ocelot in her arms. Doing the laundry was hard work. She couldn’t even use a magical device to simplify the task. As a result, while they could wash clothing and the like themselves, bigger items like these were entrusted to a place that specialized in such work.

At the moment, Latina was on her way to drop them off.

“Sorry, Theo. I can’t right now.”

She was holding enough that she felt like she’d drop it all if she lost her focus. Kenneth normally handled this job, as it was so much that Rita couldn’t possibly carry it. Latina could use magic to reduce the weight, though, so she could carry more than her thin arms could normally handle.

“Let’s play!”

“Sorry, just let me drop off this laundry, and then we can play. Just wait a little longer.”

Theo puffed up his cheeks as Latina repeated herself.

Theo’s puffed-up cheeks are so cute...

While Latina was troubled by the toddler’s smooth, squishy, puffed-up cheeks, she couldn’t help but smile. She didn’t realize that that mannerism of his was the result of him mimicking his beloved big sister.

“Noooo, let’s play!” The toddler wasn’t that reasonable, so he threw a tantrum and clung to Latina’s apron.

“T-Theo, watch ou—” The moment she shouted that out in a panic, her load suddenly grew lighter. “Let go!”

Theo didn’t stop his struggling and writhing regardless, so Vint grabbed the scruff of the toddler’s neck with his mouth. Because he was so used to dealing with Theo, Vint managed to choose the perfect spot so as not to strangle or harm him.

“Vint.”

Vint wagged his tail, indicating that he was saying “Hurry up and go.” Latina look relieved and called out to Theo once more, saying, “Sorry, Theo. We’ll play when I get back, alright?”

“Noooo!” Theo complained, his gaze fixated on her hair as Latina picked the laundry back up and left.

Vint put Theo back on the ground when Latina was fully out of view. He dropped the toddler rather roughly, but Theo didn’t start crying.

“Sis!”

Theo stood up after having fallen on his backside, then tried to run off in the direction Latina was heading. Vint smoothly obstructed his path.

“Vi, you’re in the way!”

“Woof.”

When Theo tried to cut around, Vint blocked him with his body once again. Even when Theo puffed up his cheeks, Vint didn’t relax his guard at all. From the soaring wolf’s point of view, what mattered most was whether or not Latina was being disadvantaged. The reason he watched after Theo was because he knew how fond Latina was of the toddler.

If anything happened to this tiny human child, Latina would be sad. That needed to be avoided. That was why he couldn’t let Theo interfere with Latina when she had her hands full, nor could he let anything happen to the boy while she was gone.

“Hmph!” Theo groaned in displeasure, but he still didn’t cry.

The toddler looked more like his mother than his father. His hair was soft and fluffy, as was characteristic of toddlers, and was black, which strengthened the resemblance. However, when it came to his personality, it was hard to say who he took after. Both of his parents were strong-willed. Rita naturally thought Kenneth was an outstanding man, and so did the influential adventurers who visited the Ocelot. Behind his friendly demeanor, he was quite tough.

Having inherited all sorts of things from such parents, such a minor issue wasn’t enough to make him break down in tears.

He charged at Vint. The beast dodged agilely, then knocked the now-unbalanced toddler over with a tap of his front paw.

Sure enough, he teared up a bit.

Feeling a paw on his back only annoyed him further. Vint didn't like it when Theo asked to touch him, but he was fine pushing his paw onto the toddler. When Theo went to stand up again, Vint didn't try to stop him.

Theo went to challenge Vint again, but his opponent clearly had the upper hand. The two playing always involved Theo tumbling over again and again and ending up covered in dirt.

By the time Dale showed up in the backyard, Theo had already forgotten his initial goal and was now focused on going up against Vint.

Thanks to the night festival, the number of adventurers in Kreuz now exceeded how many jobs were available. That was a problem during this time every year. As a result, adventurers of a certain skill level restrained themselves from taking anything but the most difficult of jobs, leaving work for those who were lacking in experience and funds. This unwritten rule was a form of cooperation between the adventurers. At the same time, acting greedy for work around now would only serve to severely harm one's own reputation. Having so much free time right now was proof of one's abilities.

Dale was spending his excess time off at the Ocelot.

Over these past years, whenever Dale was free, he'd spent as much time together with Latina as he could. As a result, he didn't have any true "free time."

This year, however, Latina was pressed for time due to work, and on top of that, she was using her breaks to study magic. She was just too busy to make time for Dale right now.

Even though he knew he should feel glad to see her growing up, he still felt like crying from time to time.

And so, Dale sought out the toddler and the pup in order to kill some time.

"What are you two doing...?"

"Woof."

"Dale."

Theo called Latina "Sis," but for some reason, he just called Dale by his first name. It felt irrational to him. He just couldn't understand it.

"Have you been playing with Vint?"

"I'm gonna beat Vi!"

"That may still be a bit of a tall task for you, Theo..."

"Woof."

He was still just a cub, but Vint was a mythical beast, and mythical beasts were even stronger than magical beasts. He wasn't the sort of opponent a toddler could defeat. Apparently, that was the source of the self-satisfied look on Vint's face.

"I can do it!"

"It'll be tough..."

Even so, Theo kept insisting, so Dale shrugged his shoulders a bit and then picked up a stick lying on the ground. After giving it a test swing, he looked over at Vint.

"Are you ready, Vint?"

"Woof!"

The instant after that bark, Vint leaped at Dale. Dale nimbly and easily dodged, only for Vint to pounce at him once more immediately after landing. Twisting his upper body the minimum amount necessary, Dale avoided the attack once more and then swung his stick. Vint ducked down to the ground, and Dale's attack missed him.

Theo watched this frantic offense and defense intently with his mouth wide open.

Vint was still just a cub. He was no match for Dale on his own, as the difference in ability between them was just too great. That was precisely what made him the perfect opponent to offer Vint some challenging "play."

"Is Vi stronger than Dale?"

"Is that how it looks to you, Theo?"

Dale occasionally stopped Vint's blows with his left hand, whereas Dale's stick didn't even graze Vint. From Theo's point of view, Vint may have appeared to be the dominant one. However, that was because both of them were just "playing," with neither displaying their full strength. If they were to do so and got fired up, then one of them would probably get injured. They obviously wouldn't hurt one another badly enough to endanger their lives, though, and there was always healing magic. That wasn't where their worries lay.

If one of them got injured, Latina would find out, and they'd probably get scolded. They'd have to sit up straight next to one another as Latina lectured them with her hands on her hips. That much would be fine. Well, not fine, but they could deal with it. The real issue is that when she was angry, Latina may not talk to them for a while. That absolutely had to be avoided.

He played with Vint for a while, but Dale knew that while Vint was a very sensible animal, they couldn't keep going for too long. It was important to end

things before Vint started getting too worked up.

Dale then looked over at Theo. The boy had picked up a thin stick and was swinging it around, mimicking him.

“Theo, make sure you don’t swing sticks at people.”

“That’s bad?”

“If you hit them, it’ll hurt. You shouldn’t do something to others that you wouldn’t want done to you,” Dale warned.

“When you’re a bit older, I’ll teach you how to use a sword...” Dale said, wondering absentmindedly all the while if that should be Kenneth’s role. Still, he got the feeling that it might be too difficult for a toddler to start off learning the basics with a battleaxe. It wasn’t as if Kenneth never used a sword, but Dale couldn’t picture him using anything but a battleaxe. Just trying to imagine it felt wrong. It seemed that impressions really were a powerful thing.

As Dale gazed off into the distance, thinking such things, the toddler had the stick knocked out of his hand with the cub’s tail, then was knocked over once more.

The next day, Dale kept Theo company.

Dale walked through town with the toddler under his arm, his limbs flailing about as he screamed. It wouldn’t be strange at all for the town guard to be called on him at any moment. But the surprised passersby decided from the man’s composed posture and what the boy was wailing about that this wasn’t something to report, and their expressions grew full of understanding.

“I want Sis, not you, Dale!”

“Sorry, but I’m all you’ve got.”

“I wanna go with Sis!”

“Latina’s busy with work.”

“Woof.”

“Nooo!”

Dale was heading for the park in the center of Kreuz, with the cub by his side. Theo was generally in a bad mood lately because Latina was so busy. He wanted his beloved big sister to pay more attention to him, but she said she couldn’t play with him because the shop was packed. On top of that, she was also “studying” and talking to customers. It wasn’t fair that she wouldn’t play with him. If she had time to talk with customers, then she should be able to play with him, right? That’s what Theo thought. Playing with Vint was fun, but Theo wanted his beloved big sister to dote on him more.

They arrived at the park, where a great number of townsfolk were spending

their free time again today. Vint wagged his tail when he saw the wide-open space.

“Vint, don’t use magic. And don’t go digging around randomly.”

“Woof.”

“I’ll be reporting back to Latina later.”

“Woof!” It was a favorable response. He got the feeling that Vint was still making light of his words, but it’d be his loss if he let that bug him.

Vint only listened to Latina’s orders. She may not have intended to give him orders, but Vint would always obey her requests, so it was essentially the same thing as a result. However, Vint did have some respect for Dale and Kenneth in his own way. This was both because Latina respected them and Vint recognized them as being stronger than he was. By his canine sense of values, he recognized them as superior.

He was a very clever animal, so he mostly understood what was said to him.

However, in the hierarchy of the residents of the Ocelot, it was Rita who came after Latina. He didn’t follow her orders, but he did pay attention when she scolded him. This may have been because he saw how the men of the Ocelot were no match for her.

Dale lowered Theo down onto the grass in the park, and the toddler broke out in a run. Dale smiled a bit while watching the young boy, and his mind started to wander.

Oh right, Yorck will have his second kid soon... What should I send to congratulate him?

It seemed that his younger brother was getting along quite well with his wife, Frida. The letters he periodically sent back and forth with his home village were not just updates on how they were doing, but also served as reports on the state of the world. When they came back with his grammar and spelling mistakes corrected in red, it pissed him off. It was largely his grandmother who did that.

Vint had picked up a stick from somewhere and brought it to Dale, so he tossed it. Vint caught it while Theo watched, then wagged his tail, looking satisfied with himself. Hating to lose, Theo puffed up his cheeks and then looked motivated.

Is that alright...?

Competing and playing with a dog may have been good for a toddler’s upbringing, but playing with a mythical beast every day may have been a bit excessive.

Well, his parents aren’t stopping them, so... I guess it’s fine.

Dale threw the stick again and gazed on at the peaceful sight of the two of them competing over it.

After a while, he took a now-exhausted Theo to the shade of a tree. When the boy started dozing off, Dale scooped him up as he was accustomed to doing, and then Theo nodded off.

Vint was running about the park, doing his own thing, only to suddenly stop and sniff the air a few times. Just when Dale noticed that, the cub went darting off somewhere.

“Dale!” he heard before long. Sure enough, Vint had run off to greet Latina. She was heading towards him, holding a wicker basket in her hand.

“Is it okay for you not to be working?”

“It’s not like I’m *always* working,” Latina responded with a laugh before sitting down at his side. She stared at the sleeping Theo with a smile. “I brought Theo a snack, but he’s sleeping so peacefully, we shouldn’t wake him.”

“You could sleep anywhere, too...”

“I don’t do that anymore.”

“That’s true.”

Latina puffed up her cheeks a bit not because she was upset, but because she was embarrassed. It made Dale glad to see that this childish habit still remained despite how much she had grown.

“You really are cute, Latina...”

“What’s that about, all of the sudden?”

“It’s really hit me, watching Theo. You were always trying your hardest.”

He then patted her head like he used to when she was young, and Latina looked a little troubled. It may not have been proper to do that with a girl of her age.

That’s a lonely thought...

Had she come to find it annoying, being together with him? Was he the only one feeling lonely? Were kids destined to leave the sentimental adults behind as they steadily grew older?

Latina stared at him with her big grey eyes, looking confused.

“Have you made your plans for the night festival...?”

“Yeah. We’re going to meet up at Chloe’s house. We’ll be back late, so I’ll be back after seeing Chloe and Sylvia home.”

“You’re going to see them home...?!”

“It’d be dangerous to let them go home late on their own. I’ve been studying magic for self-defense lately, and there will be a lot of guardsmen and

adventurers hired as bodyguards around, so I'll be fine."

He couldn't deny what she was saying. It was true that she possessed a great deal more offensive capabilities than her friends. But she didn't have a strong sense of danger.

"M-Maybe I should come pick you up?"

"It's fine. I'm not a little kid anymore."

That was precisely why he was worried. Why didn't she understand that?

However, he was hesitant to tell Latina all about the dangers of men the world over. If she came to see him as some repulsive creature too, he wouldn't be able to recover. It would kill him. Latina's cold gaze would cut through him and damage him greater than any blade or magic ever could.

"It's a difficult choice..." he muttered without thinking.

"Hmm?" Latina tilted her head, truly perplexed.

Still, he decided that he wanted to raise Latina to be honest and pure.

"It's nothing... Ah, right, it looks like Theo's up." Trying to change the topic, he directed Latina's attention towards Theo, who was starting to stir.

"Really? Are you awake, Theo?"

"Hrngh...? Sis?" His eyes shot open and, realizing that Latina was there, he reached out for her to hold him. Latina, meanwhile, was perfectly happy to dote on him. "Sis."

"What is it, Theo?"

Rather than responding, Theo simply gave a happy laugh and a smile.

While Dale watched them, Vint rubbed his head up against him.

"What is it...?"

"Woof!"

"It's not like I'm jealous of Theo or something."

"Woof."

Dale ran his fingers through the grey fur of the cub shooting him a knowing glance. All the while, he thought about just what his current position was as her father, unable to come up with an answer as his thoughts went in circles.

†

That customer stayed at the Dancing Ocelot until a few days before the Ahmar night festival.

When the door swung open and a young man entered, the hustle and bustle of the shop stopped for a moment. As he looked over the shop, the regulars grew

tense. He had a refreshing, orderly appearance to him. Though he himself appeared calm, the travel outfit he wore was disheveled. It was proof that he had hurried here.

“Welcome!”

The regulars were on edge because they realized this unfamiliar young man was quite skilled, but the shop’s adorable signature waitress greeted him as always, totally unfazed. After a quick jog over to him, she approached with a smile and said, “This is your first time here, right? Have you been to Kreuz before?”

“No...”

That smile of Latina’s froze when she heard what he had to say next. His ice-blue eyes opened a little wider in surprise, and he muttered, “So you’re the Fairy Princess Dale mentioned, huh?”

Latina turned with her stiff smile toward Rita, who was holding back her laughter with a poker face.

“Rita, it’s alright if I get mad at Dale, isn’t it?”

“Go for it. To your heart’s content,” Rita responded with a nice smile on her face and a thumbs-up, and all the regulars watching added a cheer.

It was a sort of entertainment to see someone else get chewed out, as long as no harm came to you yourself.

There was an impatient feeling in the air, and no one was able to say anything as they saw her heading into the kitchen, where the stairs to her and Dale’s room were. Her footsteps sounded rougher than usual.

The young man was left behind, not understanding what was going on.

After a while, Dale came down to the shop from their room, looking haggard.

“What’s wrong...?” the man asked.

“It’s all your fault, for crying out loud!” Dale yelled in an outburst.

Dale was also at fault for having broken out in a smile at her cute, puffed-up cheeks while she was angrily lecturing him. That had driven Latina into a complete rage, forcing Dale to beg and grovel and plead. In that way, he finally managed to somehow earn her forgiveness.

However, he avoided using the phrase “I won’t do it again” as part of his desperate attempt to negotiate his way out. He didn’t want to lie to Latina, after all. So it wasn’t all that unusual that he avoided it, as he had no intention of changing his ways.

“Still, you got here awful quick, Gregor. Did you rush here the very second you got the letter?”

“Yeah. I can move relatively freely when it’s just me, after all.”

Gregor had sat down in a corner of the Ocelot, where he had calmly waited for Dale without paying any attention to the gazes of the people around him.

The aura about Gregor was that of a warrior. It was no surprise that the regulars rudely gazed at him with great interest. In addition to his obvious good breeding for an adventurer, Gregor was also a skilled enough swordsman to catch the interest of such elites.

He also realized that the regulars of this shop were quite skilled themselves. Internally, he was full of admiration. Even in the capital, you wouldn’t run across such talented folks very often. He once more realized that Kreuz was one of the greatest towns in this nation thanks to its ability to attract travelers and adventurers.

“Is Rose alright?”

“She’s in a room on the second floor right now. I heard the rough details, but... was she really kidnapped?”

“Her carriage heading from her territory to the capital was attacked. The Cornelius family isn’t all that wealthy, so she only had a suitable number of guards and servants with her... Apparently, the attackers had investigated Rose’s personality. They took the people around her hostage first.”

“Ah...”

He hadn’t thought the Rose Princess would let herself get kidnapped so easily, but that explained it.

The Cornelius family was a viscount household, making them of a lower status compared to the Eldstedt ducal household to which Gregor belonged. However, the two still interacted because their territories were adjacent and because the Eldstedt family was the main client for the unique products of the land the Cornelius family held. That’s how the two families were connected.

With the birth of Rose, who had a mana trait and unusually strong divine protection, that bond had only grown stronger. As they were one of her backers, Rose received the patronage of the ducal family. This was also essential for Duke Eldstedt. It was important to not hand over the influential card of a beautiful woman with strong divine protection to a political enemy, and to instead keep her where his influence could reach.

Those were the circumstances behind Rose and Gregor’s acquaintance. Gregor’s elder sister’s affection for Rose, who was like an adorable doll, was also part of the reason they had gotten to know each other. They’d seen each other often ever since Gregor was a young boy.

“Anyway, you want to see that Rose is okay firsthand, right? I’ll have Latina go call for—”

“No, I’m going to her. Tell me where her room is.”

Dale stopped cold for a second, at a loss for words.

“No... No, no, no. That’d be bad, right?! Think about Rose’s reputation! It’d be a problem, even if you don’t do anything!”

The young princess meeting a man in a locked room... If that fact got out, it would be more than enough to turn into a scandal. If it also became known that the man was part of Duke Eldstedt’s family, then it would become an even bigger story.

“As long as you don’t say anything, then Rose’s honor won’t be harmed, right?”

There wasn’t even the slightest hint that he was joking in the gaze of his cold, ice-blue eyes, which implicitly threatened that he’d cut Dale down if he said anything he shouldn’t.

As sweat ran down his back, Dale thought, *You’re always coldly criticizing me, calling me a doting idiot for putting Latina above everything else, but you don’t have room to talk, do you?*

He continued on, saying to his friend, “Um... Rose’s room is on the second floor, right at the top of the stairs, but... You don’t need me to accompany you, right? Yeah?”

With that single gaze from Gregor, Dale had immediately decided on his course of action. Dale was crestfallen, and his shoulders dropped as he watched Gregor climb the stairs to the second floor.

Worried about him, Latina brought him a glass of water. She had just been angry with him, but her kindness won out in the end.

“Dale, is everything alright?”

“Yeah, it’ll... probably be fine, right?”

They were both worried about someone different, but paying no heed to such details, Dale unusually muttered a prayer to the gods.

Just from hearing the knock on the door, Rose sensed who it was on the other side. The surprise almost caused her to drop the borrowed book she was holding.

He likely didn’t realize it himself, but Gregor had hesitated for just a moment. Ever since they were young, he always looked forward to seeing her, leading to this now-familiar habit.

“Rose.”

The moment she heard his voice, Rose sprang towards the door. It should’ve

been simple enough to unlock it, but her anxious heart caused her hand to shake.

“Sir Gregor...!”

Her voice trembled as she opened the door and saw him standing there.

“I’m glad to find you well, Rose.” No clear emotion showed on Gregor’s face, but there was a gentle, relieved tone to his voice.

“Sir Gregor!” Rose cried, throwing herself into Gregor’s arms. “Sir Gregor, I... I...”

“I’m glad you’re alright...”

While embracing Rose with her thin, trembling shoulders and her tear-filled eyes, Gregor quietly closed the door with his free hand.

To Rose, Dale was ultimately just an acquaintance. No matter how frightened and hurt and haggard she may have been from being kidnapped and encountering the Second Demon Lord, who was fear incarnate, she didn’t let any of that show to Dale. That was proof of just how prideful and stouthearted she was, but she most certainly wasn’t alright.

With Gregor, whom she was close to and had trusted ever since they were young, before her, everything she had been burying deep inside came bursting forth.

She couldn’t speak; she simply clung to Gregor and wept.

Gregor knew Rose very well. He knew that she had been unable to cry and had held everything inside up until now. That was why he had insisted on visiting her room by himself.

He silently held her tight, stroking her unique, rose-colored hair that was the source of her name.

Before long, she looked up at Gregor with her tear-stained, indigo-blue eyes, only to bashfully look back down immediately.

“Please forgive me. That was ill-mannered...”

“You don’t need to act tough.”

With those kind words, her tears started flowing again, and she hurriedly wiped them away with her fingers.

“Please give me just a little time, Sir Gregor. At this rate, I will not only not be able to talk... I will not even be able to show you my face.”

“There’s no need to force yourself.”

“That will not do. And I have caused Dale quite a bit of trouble... Since I lived through all of that, I have a duty to tell of what happened,” Rose plainly stated, having regained her natural composure. Gregor loosened his grip and made a faintly awkward smile, taking care that she didn’t see it. She was a noble

girl like a beautiful flower blossom, truly fitting of her namesake. He didn't want to do anything that would injure her pride.

"I'm going to talk to Dale for a while. When you're ready, come call for me. Is that alright?"

"Yes."

After hearing her response, Gregor once more headed to the first floor.

Down in the bar, Dale was waiting on Latina with a tea set. He looked somehow relieved upon seeing Gregor.

"What is it?"

"It's nothing."

Without asking the reason behind Dale's reaction, Gregor sat opposite of him.

"Rose said she wants to talk once she calms down. I'd like you to be there, but do you have a place we can use?"

"How about my room? It may not be much by your standards, but we shouldn't have to worry about being overheard there."

"That sounds good."

"It's messy right now, so I'll go clean up."

As Dale said that and stood up, Latina looked flustered.

"Dale, I'll—"

"You're busy with work. And it won't take me long, anyway."

Latina liked things tidy, so she was attentive in her cleaning to make sure the attic room they lived in didn't get messy. But because it was a private space, there were clear signs that it was lived in. Even if Gregor was a friend, that all still needed to be hidden away if someone was going to visit.

After watching Dale leave, Latina hurried into the kitchen. In no time at all, she brought out fresh tea and stood before Gregor. After placing the tray on the table, she gave a quick bow and apologized, saying, "I'm sorry for before."

Gregor thought for a bit before realizing what she was talking about.

"Not at all. I was impolite myself. Lately Dale has been referring to you as his 'Fairy Princess, the cutest in the world' without even a hint of hesitation. I said it without thinking."

"Dale..."

Gregor felt a quiet yet palpable anger unfitting of her adorable face coming off of Latina.

Interesting...

He'd put up with plenty of his friend's bragging about the girl up until now, so surely this much revenge was fair play.

It was a fresh experience, seeing his friend haggard from the young girl scolding him. He'd love to show this to the castle guards, who saw Dale as a hero.

"Just the other day, he finally bragged to my father about you."

Latina gave a single sigh, then regained her composure. She realized that there was no point in acting angry towards Gregor about this. It seemed she'd need to discuss things with Dale a little more thoroughly later, though.

Rita had overheard their conversation despite not intending to, and so she wore a terribly strained expression on her face.

Rita was familiar with Dale’s work. That young man was close to Rose, who was a noble, albeit a low-ranking one, and he was about Dale’s age. She was able to guess at who Gregor was, and as a result, she was also aware of just who Gregor’s father was as well.

“That idiot... He doesn’t know when to restrain himself...”

By the way, in regards to this chain of events, Dale said, “I *did* hold back! For over five years!” Apparently, this was a declaration that his period of self-restraint had concluded. One big reason was because Gregor’s elder sister had had a child, whom the duke was doting heavily over. That said, nobody else was concerned about that.

“I’ve heard a lot about you from Dale. He says you’re his most trusted comrade in arms... Nice to meet you. I’m Latina. Sorry for the late introduction.”

“I’m Gregor Nakiri.”

“That’s an unusual last name.”

“It’s from an eastern frontier nation.”

Gregor wasn’t giving her an alias. Rather, he knew that the influence held by the Eldstedt name was too great, so he used his mother’s family name when out and about.

Latina smiled as she thought on the word, which had a different sound to it that she wasn’t familiar with. It was a dazzling enough smile, and it made Gregor think that Dale hadn’t exaggerated about how cute this girl was at all.

“Still, I’m surprised...”

“Huh?”

Latina stopped pouring the clear tea, which she had carefully timed the brewing of, and tilted her head. Gregor made a bit of an awkward smile upon seeing that.

“From what Dale had told me about you, I got the impression that you were a little kid.”

“I see...”

“Thinking about it, it’s been several years since he first told me about you... Of course you’ve grown up.”

“Dale still thinks of me as a little kid he can’t take his eyes off of, though...”

As this was her first time meeting Gregor, Latina wore a more composed and proper expression than usual. As a result, she had a more mature air to her than her age would suggest. She’d always been sharp, so she definitely understood how to act appropriately for the situation. But when she let her guard down, her natural childish appearance would pop up. Since it was Gregor’s first time

meeting her, though, and he didn’t know Latina that well, she gave the impression of a more mature, composed, and polite girl than what he had expected.

The teacup that Latina offered with a practiced motion was plain and simple, but the scent wafting off it wasn’t half bad. As he sipped the tea, even Gregor was satisfied enough that he found it hard to believe it was being offered in a pub in the rough part of town. It of course was no match for what was served in the duke’s home, but the taste was a testament to the careful scrutiny of the shop’s owner. Gregor thought he must be quite a skilled chef.

And he thought the same of the girl before him now. From the way she handled the tea set, he could tell that she knew her manners full well. Her beauty was out of place in a dingy pub like this. He didn’t want to accept it, but he now understood what had made his friend become so fawning and pathetic.

Even if she were placed amongst the noble young ladies of the capital, she’d still stand out. Her brilliant, glamorous platinum hair would steal the gazes of those around her more than any gemstone or golden jewelry.

In addition to her beautiful looks, she had the air of a wildflower, with a gentle warmth to her that soothed the heart. It would be a great relief if there were anyone like her in the plot-infested imperial court.

Now that I think on it, he’s always saying that...

Dale said things like, “I don’t have enough Latina to soothe me! Let me go back! I need to return to my Latina even a moment sooner!” And despite trying to forget it, Gregor also couldn’t help but remember the deplorable appearance of Dale at his worst—when he’d been muttering his daughter’s name while sharpening his blade.

It was all the more deplorable that that state actually made his friend work more effectively. It wasn’t as if he normally slacked at all, but when he reached his worst, he gave everything he had to get back even a little bit sooner.

To start with, even from the point of view of Gregor, who was part of the Eldstedt family, known for producing highly skilled individuals, Dale was worthy of high praise. Even aside from his rare ability that made him a “hero,” he was a master at both offensive and defensive magic, excelled with both a sword and a bow, and was skilled at adapting to any unusual situation in battle, making him someone worthy of praise even in a country like Laband, which fostered both physical and magical combat skills.

Some nobles scorned him at first for his birth, deriding him as a country bumpkin. However, Dale wiped away their sneers with his accomplishments and

perfect decorum. He utterly defeated those scorning nobles on the stage of high society by carefully polishing his conduct with their younger counterparts. That of course earned him some resentment, but that was overwhelmed by the applause of the other nobles.

Those who could only take pride in their lineage couldn't hope to measure up to Dale's skills. And since he hated to lose, he wasn't content to rest on his laurels and rely on his skills alone.

That was precisely why Gregor found his friend's eccentricities so regrettable. But ever since he started living together with his adopted daughter, Dale seemed much less emotionally up against the wall. As long as he wasn't having a fit, there was now a relaxed dignity to him.

The duke's evaluation of him had also risen over the years, and now there were none in the castle who didn't know of the deep trust he had in Dale Reki.

Gregor couldn't say that it was all bad.

"Do you know about Dale's work?" Gregor asked, remembering that the girl in front of him was part of a different race.

"No. Dale says it's related to important classified secrets, so I don't ask him about it."

Hearing her reply, Gregor decided that it was best not to tell her about what Dale did.

It was no secret that Dale had a contract with the duke and served to eliminate demon lords and their subordinates. However, since Gregor's friend had decided not to tell the girl, he needed to respect that. After all, his work involved slaughtering members of her race.

It was then that Dale showed up again, interrupting their conversation.

"Sorry for the wait, Gregor. It's a bit cramped, but my room is this way," Dale said, pointing towards the kitchen.

"You didn't do anything impolite, right, Latina?" Dale said, his words perfectly fitting for a parent.

Without his facial expression shifting even a bit, Gregor retorted, "What if she said she did?"

"I would have figured you did something you shouldn't have."

"That's what I assumed."

Gregor had expected such a response.

After that exchange with his friend, Dale turned towards Latina.

"Latina, could you call for Rose?"

"Right. Should I carry some tea up after that? If everyone's going to be

talking, that’d be good, right? Could you wait for that?”

“Yeah, this may take some time... Thanks, we’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Leave it to me!”

Hearing that exchange, Gregor realized that the two really did have a harmonious relationship. He didn’t even realize it when he broke out in a smile, but Dale did.

“What’s with that grin?”

“It’s nothing... I was just thinking that she really is a proper young lady, despite being raised by you,” Gregor said, half-trying to hide his embarrassment.

“Even you’re reacting that way?!”

Dale’s younger brother had once said something similar to him, but Gregor had no way of knowing that. For the time being, he’d managed to reopen Dale’s old wounds.

†

The room Dale and Latina lived in was decorated in the style of Dale’s home village, and it was intriguing to Gregor and Rose, who were both Laband nobles. With the addition of accessories and fabrics suited to Latina’s tastes, it now had a more pleasant feel to it than when Dale had lived there alone.

Rose had already visited numerous times to teach Latina magic, so she sat down, already used to it. Gregor hesitated for a moment, but then followed Dale’s example and sat down as well.

After a short while, Latina brought up a tea set. Latina silently delivered the tea and then returned back downstairs. Rose took a sip and then started discussing what had happened to her.

Rose served at the temple, so she didn’t appear in high society very often. She was always either in her own family’s domain or traveling around offering condolences at the behest of the temple. Her beautiful, rare appearance was practically a symbol of the temple of Niili. The strong impression Rose and her miraculous healing magic left on the townsfolk was also greatly important for the temples, which also served as clinics.

The Cornelius household that Rose belonged to was not especially wealthy. In that way, Rose wouldn’t normally be all that useful for a political marriage. However, her personal value and talents were outstanding.

Rose was fully aware of her own standing, and that she was more valuable than her family knew what to do with, so she threw herself overly much into her

work with the temple.

When she'd been in the middle of moving about for such work, her carriage was targeted. With her, she only had her chamberlain, a young coachman, a soldier dispatched from the temple as a guard, and a maid who waited on her.

When they were surrounded by bandits, her servant fell into a panic. She may have been a proper attendant, but she was ultimately just a country girl who had polished up her manners in order serve the low-ranking noble Cornelius family. It's not as if she was prepared to deal with an emergency situation. Thanks to her snap judgments, she got herself captured by the bandits.

In exchange for the lives of her subordinates, Rose agreed to obediently follow the bandit's orders. That decision was also based on her judgment that since their goal was to kidnap her, her life would not be in any immediate danger. Rose made it clear that she would take her own life if they did anything to disgrace her, so the bandits acted more or less gentlemanly.

Even now, she still didn't know what the bandits' objective was. Most likely, their goal was to negotiate with her guardian, Duke Eldstedt. The Cornelius family itself wasn't a juicy enough target for a kidnapping, and from the way they boldly let her subordinates live and inform the Cornelius family of Rose's kidnapping, she sensed that this was a crime committed by some large organization.

The bandits then transported Rose and her maid to a small, remote village.

"Are you alright, Lily?"

That whole time, Rose didn't stop worrying about her maid. The woman may have been a country girl who lacked tact, but Rose still concerned herself greatly over the maid, who also had a flower-based name.

On the surface, Rose was obediently listening to the bandits, but the whole time she was looking for a chance to escape. She may have had her magic tool taken away, but even without such a thing, she had no problem casting magic.

The bandits headed for the most luxurious building in the village, which was likely once the villa of a wealthy merchant. If they had realized along the way that the village was too quiet even for a small country settlement, things might have gone quite differently.

When they entered the manor, they immediately saw a single young girl. She was seated on the handrail to the stairs, wearing enamel shoes on her feet and swinging her legs under her knee-length skirt. She had a nice, innocent-looking young face, long blond hair, and big blue eyes, giving her the appearance of an adorable, expensive bisque doll. To top it all off, she wore an impractically

extravagant outfit on her slender body.

By human standards, she looked to be a pre-teen. That said, she had chalk-white horns on both sides of her head, making it clear that she was a devil.

The second Rose saw the girl, an indescribable chill ran down her spine. Her presence there was more than just unnatural: it was downright eerie.

That she sensed that was the difference between Rose and the bandits, and it may have had a decisive effect on what happened next.

“What are you—” one of the men said, approaching the girl. In the next instant, he collapsed to the ground in an unnatural manner. His limbs and neck were pointing in impossible directions. Before everyone else could even register what had happened, a deep crimson spread across the floor.

With a brilliant smile that showed she was clearly enjoying herself, the blond girl waved about the objects she had in each hand. While they were unfitting with such a young girl, she wielded them so naturally that it was easy to miss the massive blades she held.

Blood sprayed through the air.

The girl spun about with such elegance that it felt almost unreal. The golden sparkle of her hair and the shine of her blades drew an arc through the air.

Before anyone could even understand what was going on and scream or shout out in anger, several corpses (it was obvious they were dead, even without checking) were strewn about the floor, and the pool of blood grew wider.

Her skinny arms swung the blades with incredible ease, unleashing strikes that even cut through bone. And on her face, she wore an elegant grin. She looked like a child plucking the wings off an insect she had captured. It was a smile of deep-rooted cruelty.

The weak beings before her were wiped out by this overwhelming presence, unable to even resist.

Rose was in the minority that was able to grasp what was happening. With that said, while she was an excellent magic user, she wasn’t able to throw herself into the fray. It was the most she could manage to not lose consciousness at the stench of the blood and meat flying about, which was so strong you could choke on it. In fact, it was precisely because she was so skilled that she realized she couldn’t possibly oppose the being that stood before her.

Even so, Rose was able to remain rational. However, her maid, Lily, descended into a panic. That was perfectly understandable, since seeing such a being brought about a primal terror. Lily shook off Rose, who was trying to hold her back, let out an unintelligible shriek, and tried to flee.

“You’re an earsore.”

By the time Rose realized that charming voice had come from the girl in her bloodstained dress, Lily was already crawling across the floor, desperately trying to escape.

“Come now, you can cry better than that for me.”

The girl swung down her blade, and Lily’s legs flew through the air. It would be an understatement to call the sound that came from the maid a shriek, and the girl gave a refined, charming smile.

“Oh, my. When it comes to servants, even their voices are unpleasant. Be silent.”

With that, she casually brought down her deadly weapon.

Rose simply watched as this happened. She wasn’t able to do anything else. She was so afraid that she couldn’t even move.

“Stay as you are.”

It was a female voice with an ever so slightly unique intonation to it that called Rose out of her daze. Frozen stiff, she turned her gaze to the back of the woman the voice had come from, and the corner of her sight was filled with a brilliant purple.

“You aren’t yet fated to die right now. For the time being, stay quiet and bear it.”

Even if she weren’t in such a situation, the woman’s voice would have brought Rose comfort. It had a gentle quality to it, of the sort that would calm down whoever heard it.

Rose moved her head slowly to check and found that she was a young devil woman. Her long, straight hair was a brilliant purple, and her horns were a dazzling gold. There wasn’t a hint of emotion showing on her beautiful face.

There was a strange string of characters clearly tattooed on her slim, white neck, like some sort of code.

“Why is she doing such a thing...?” Rose whispered in a hoarse voice.

The woman responded with a whisper as well, saying, “My lord has no reason.” The tone of her voice when she said “my lord” was chilly. “If there is any meaning to her actions, then her goal... is solely to kill.”

“The Second Demon Lord...!”

Just as Rose realized who she was dealing with, the last of the bandits cried out for mercy. Perhaps that alone was enough to call him “courageous.”

“S-Spare me! Please don’t kill me!”

The demon lord in the shape of a young girl wore a compassionate smile in

response to the plea she would never possibly consider truly granting.

“Oh, my. Shall I let you live, then?”

She looked to be enjoying herself greatly.

She brought down her weapons.

“Don’t worry. I know *just* what to do so you won’t die.”

She slashed again and again.

Even if it was muffled by the man’s screams, Rose heard the girl’s clear, high-pitched “singing.” Rose went even paler when she realized what that “song” was.

“Healing magic...!”

It was highly precise, too. The Second Demon Lord was slicing the man up while casting healing magic. She was healing him, taking care that he wouldn’t die... not *allowing* him to die.

This cruel game continued on until the man, his voice full of despair, begged, “Please kill me...”

If the violet-haired woman wasn’t standing behind Rose as if to support her, she may not have been able to hold herself together. It may not have lasted all that long, but it certainly didn’t feel that way.

Once everyone else was a corpse, the adorable girl awash in fresh blood looked at Rose. Her blue eyes looked quite eerie, as they didn’t have even a hint of guilt to them.

Rose shivered in response to being looked at, but thanks to her natural pride, she undauntedly coped with the gaze of the monster before her.

“Hmm?” the Second Demon Lord said with curiosity while looking at Rose. She tilted her head and casually approached.

“Oh, my, what a pretty color. They’re almost like lapis lazuli,” she said, almost sounding jealous as she gazed at Rose’s eyes. The look on her face was entirely innocent, despite the fact that she was the one who had created this horrid spectacle. That fact itself was repulsively twisted.

“My lord, this person’s hair is also a magical trait.”

“Oh, my, what color is it? Let me see.”

The bandits had prepared the chestnut-colored wig, not wanting Rose to stand out. Even though Rose was still wearing it, the violet-haired devil woman had stated that without hesitation, clearly already aware of that fact.

Rose obediently exposed her natural hair.

“Oh, my, it really is a pretty color! Show me more!”

Rather than just being simple rose-pink, Rose’s hair had a variety of shades due to the light shining on it, making for a rare color even amongst mana traits.

The Second Demon Lord’s slender arm reached out to touch Rose’s hair.

“My lord.”

“What is it?”

“Would it not be a shame to sully it with the blood of such lowly men?”

The girl’s hands stopped after hearing the woman’s advice. It was then that she finally remembered the gore coating her hands and that she was still holding her large blades.

“That’s true. It’d be a waste to stain something so beautiful!”

The Second Demon Lord suddenly pulled back her hand with a smile and then turned around.

“I’m going to go take a bath.”

“Take your time.”

The Second Demon Lord pitter-pattered off into the depths of the mansion. After seeing her leave, Rose nearly collapsed to the floor, thoroughly worn out.

“Hold yourself together,” the woman rebuked, halting her collapse. Rose somehow managed to stop herself from losing consciousness and falling into the sea of blood on the floor. But even so, she wasn’t able to stop her body from trembling.

“Why... Why did she do this...?”

Rose couldn’t help but grieve over the lives taken in vain, not only of her own maid, but the bandits who kidnapped her as well. Having only been able to watch such brutality unfold, Rose now moaned in agony while hiding her face behind her hands.

However, the devil woman didn’t give Rose enough time for such grieving.

“There’s no time for that now. Hurry up and leave this place as soon as you can,” the woman said while grabbing Rose’s shoulders, using a firm tone of voice and a solemn expression on her face. “My lord has a liking for mana traits. However, she only sees them as playthings. She just wants to keep her favorite toys by her side.” From the bitter tone of her voice and her words, it was clear that she was not serving the Second Demon Lord by her own will.

The woman had shown off Rose’s mana trait because she knew that would catch her master’s interest. As a result of that, the Second Demon Lord hadn’t killed Rose immediately. It was just a temporary solution, but it was the most surefire way to save Rose’s life. But even so, at this rate Rose would be held captive and suffer a torturous fate far worse than death... just like she had.

“It is not yet your time to die, so keep on struggling. If you do, you should be able to escape.”

Rose was a high-ranking priestess, so she could tell that the devil woman before her had incredibly strong divine protection. It was enough that it felt

strong even to an unusually powerful priestess like Rose. Rose sensed that the woman was equal to her in that regard, or perhaps even stronger.

“Are you a priestess of Banafsaj...?”

The power granted by the divine protection of Banafsaj was premonitions. Rose had sensed something out of place from the woman’s phrasing, so she asked to make sure. In response, the woman silently nodded her head.

“But... if I run away, what will happen to you?”

Realizing from Rose’s tone that she was concerned about her, the woman smiled just a bit.

“I cannot escape from my lord. These restraints are proof of that.” The woman touched the characters tattooed on her neck as she said that. “This is a ‘name’ engraved by a demon lord into her servant. It is proof that I am granted her power, and also controlled by it. To become a demon serving a demon lord means yielding life-and-death power over yourself to your lord.”

“Then even more so... If it becomes known that you let me escape, what fate will await you...?”

In response to Rose’s sorrowful voice, the woman responded, sounding as if she were gently correcting an unreasonable child. “You saw what happened before, yes? My lord will not murder me until I beg for it. I have such an agreement with my lord.”

And she then added just a bit more.

“Also, things are always that way for me. My lord has always looked forward to the time she’ll get me to make that request.”

Hearing that horribly abnormal statement, Rose only grew paler, but the woman gently pushed her on the back so she’d take a single step forward.

“Why? Why... Why does the Second Demon Lord do such terrible things...? Even if she is the Second Demon Lord, how can such a young girl do such horrible, awful things...?”

The woman negated Rose’s anguish and bewilderment-filled questions in a clear voice. “It is not that she can do such things because she’s a demon lord. Rather, she was able to *become* a demon lord because she had such a disposition. I don’t think you’ll be able to understand her.”

She did not bring about death and slaughter because she was the Second Demon Lord. Rather, she needed such preferences to start with in order to be able to become the Second Demon Lord. That’s what the woman was saying.

Demon lords appeared from within the devil race. However, they were not born as demon lords possessing such massive power from the very start. Instead,

those who were qualified amongst the devils *became* demon lords. One with the qualities of a king became the First Demon Lord, one who desired the power to wage wars and cause strife became the Seventh Demon Lord, and one who wished to overcome all fear of illness became the Fourth Demon Lord.

Rose could never hope to understand the reason this girl could enjoy slaughter with a smile, reveling in the anguished cries of the dying. Their values were too different, down to their very cores.

With an ever so slight smile, the woman gave Rose another push. While Rose wished that she could have even a hint of the strength of this woman, who could smile even under these circumstances, she started moving, as if some curse causing her legs to freeze up had suddenly been lifted. She wanted to give her maid a proper burial, but she knew that she couldn't possibly hope for such a thing now. While giving thanks in the depths of her heart, she headed for the exit to the manor.

After that, she left that place without ever turning back.

†

Having finished her tale, Rose drooped her slender shoulders, completely drained of energy.

"Just as she'd said, I was able to make it out of that place alive. Along the way, as I passed through the village, I didn't sense anyone... Most likely..."

She paused for a moment, then continued. "After I report to Father, it will be necessary to head there to confirm. We'll need to hurry and assemble a party." Gregor muttered in a gloomy voice in response to Rose's story. He turned to Dale. "I'd like you to be a part of it."

"Right," Dale briefly responded.

Rose had headed to Kreuz and sought out Dale in particular because she was terrified of the Second Demon Lord. She had heard from Gregor that Dale had the rare abilities required to be called a hero. It was said that heroes were the only ones able to overcome a demon lord.

Rose had sought the presence of a hero to calm her overwhelming terror of the demon lord, which had seeped into the depths of her heart. As a result, thanks to being protected by such a hero, as well as her contact with Latina, who was a genius when it came to calming those around her, Rose had been able to regain her composure.

Dale hadn't realized because he didn't know her too well, but when Rose first

arrived at the Dancing Ocelot, she was not her usual self. She had just been holding herself together by trying to act brave.

To Rose as she was now, just hearing Dale and Gregor discuss their plan for what to do next was as calming as a lullaby.

For the time being, Rose would be under the protection of the Eldstedt family until it was clear who was behind the incident. She'd head to the capital with Gregor and then stay at the duke's estate. It was the manor of a household second only to the royal family in its authority. It was far more securely guarded than the estate of Rose's family, so she'd be safer there.

Rose gently closed her eyes.

As she felt the warmth of Gregor by her side and heard his gentle voice, she at last felt relief in the depths of her heart, knowing that she had truly survived the incident.

†

This occurred a short while after Rose escaped the manor.

Having washed herself off and put on a new dress, the Second Demon Lord looked about her surroundings and then looked disappointed, not seeing Rose anywhere.

However, that was only for a moment.

Her young appearance was because she was that age when she had become a demon lord. Her values had grown distorted since that time, and over her many long years as an absolute presence, she'd come to find things not going her way as a spice of life to help distract her from her boredom.

That was also the reason she had a fondness for the customs of humans and had learned their language. She found the culture of the race she'd been born into, wherein those with long lifespans strove to maintain the status quo, terribly boring.

"Oh, my. You let her escape, didn't you?" There was a palpable enjoyment in the girl's high-pitched voice. "She was so beautiful and adorable, but it seems she was also strong-willed. That makes it all the more a shame that she got away."

As she let out a high-pitched laugh, she also entangled her fingers in the violet hair of the woman before her.

It was incredibly rare for someone to not only not faint from seeing such a terrible sight, but even defy her by running away. And so, the Second Demon

Lord wore a bit of regret on her face, realizing she was also at fault for having underestimated Rose.

“You really are awful,” she said with a sweet voice like one would use when talking to her lover, looking down at the woman on her knees before her. Even with a knife pierced through her abdomen, this favorite toy of hers didn’t even let out a single scream.

As a demon serving the Second Demon Lord, the woman was built far tougher than a normal devil, so she wouldn’t die from such a wound. Rather, she was unable to die.

“If you just beg for death, then I’ll put you out of your misery. You want to be set free, don’t you?”

While the woman coughed up clumps of blood between painful breaths, she stared back at the Second Demon Lord with a gaze imbued with her strong will. “You won’t alter our contract, will you?”

“I will not. Games are no fun if you don’t play by the rules.”

“Then it’s pointless to ask. I will never give in.”

While staring straight into the Second Demon Lord’s blue eyes, the woman gave a daring smile.

“As long as I’m alive, you won’t lay a hand on my daughter. As long as that contract exists, I will never yield.”

Seeing the woman’s continued strength for the one she wished to protect, the demon lord in the shape of a little girl smiled from the depths of her heart and raised her red-stained weapon overhead.

The Second Demon Lord started amusing herself with her favorite toy once more.

7: The Platinum-haired Maiden and the Night Festival

As you'd expect from the name, the main events of the Ahmar night festival occurred after the sun went down. Though with that said, all throughout the day of the festival, the town of Kreuz was awash in excitement. It was the greatest festival in the second-biggest town in Laband, after all, so that was no surprise.

Rita saw Latina off while the sun was still out.

"Well then, I'm off!"

"Take care, Latina!"

"Right!"

Dale had worried so overly much, but he was out right now. Rose had chosen the day of the night festival for her departure for the capital so she could blend into the large crowd of travelers. Dale had accompanied her and Gregor, acting as a guard. Though with that said, he wasn't traveling with them all the way to the capital. Dale's job was to escort Gregor and Rose to a place slightly removed from Kreuz and then wait for the arrival of a flying dragon.

Gregor had ridden to Kreuz on his own, swapping out his horse several times along the way. Afterwards, he contacted the capital and had the duke dispatch a flying dragon. The number of people who could fly through the sky was limited, so this was easily the safest method for traveling back.

Latina wasn't fully aware of Rose's circumstances or Gregor's lineage. To her, this work wasn't all that different than Dale's usual jobs involving exterminating magical beasts. Latina was concerned by Rose's encounter with the Second Demon Lord at first, but during Rose's stay at the Ocelot, that had faded.

Now that the over-worrying Dale wasn't around, Latina's mind was currently worked up over getting to act like an adult and head out at night alone for the first time.

Though Vint normally always accompanied her, he wasn't by her side at the moment. Instead he was currently sprawled out at Rita's feet, sulking. He and Latina had had an argument in the morning. Vint found it only obvious that he'd accompany Latina to the festival, but she had refused him. To Latina, it was her

first time in a while to go out with her friends, as well as her first time being able to go out alone at night. She saw it as a precious acknowledgment, small as it was, that she had grown up. As a girl her age, there were all sorts of things she wanted to discuss with her friends, so she wanted Vint to stay behind.

Down inside, Rita and Kenneth had wanted Vint to accompany her. Even the absent Dale had accepted that things would be alright because Vint would be with her. But wanting Vint to stay behind, Latina had played her trump card.

“If you keep saying that, Vint, then I won’t brush you anymore...”

She said it quietly and with a sigh, but her eyes were totally serious. Vint was so terribly shaken by those words that even Rita and Kenneth, who were standing nearby, couldn’t help but sympathize with him.

“L-Latina?”

“I won’t.”

“Angry? Angry?”

“I won’t.”

“Really angry?!”

Latina turned her head away as Vint ran around her, his voice was full of sorrow and desperation.

That’s a threat, Latina...

Latina's always had a tendency to be stubborn every now and again...

As the married couple thought such things while watching over this exchange, the matter was settled.

"Wah... angry! I... stay behind..."

Vint crumbled before Latina's threat. He was heartbroken and even though he was an animal, his shoulders sagged.

No matter how much Rita and Kenneth asked him to do so afterwards, now that things had been settled, Vint wouldn't accompany Latina.

And that's how Latina had earned the right to go out at night without a guardian, just like she'd wanted.

To be honest, Rita and Kenneth were worried. However, they weren't as far gone as Dale was and realized she was growing up; they knew they couldn't keep having someone watch over her everywhere forever. And they were aware that a night like tonight, with plenty of bodyguards all throughout town, would be a fitting first step for her to experience that.

"Seriously, be careful!" Rita put even more emphasis on her words than when she first saw Latina off to school. She sighed.

If anything happens to Latina, it'll end up raining blood...

She figured that wouldn't be very good for her pregnancy.

After leaving the Dancing Ocelot, Latina frequently stopped to check out the travelers passing by and the wooden stages erected about town for the festival. She was absolutely exhilarated as she stared at them.

Even if she had seen it annually since she came to Kreuz six years ago, this different atmosphere running throughout the town still sent her heart aflutter. Seeing the streets she was so accustomed to now seem so fresh thanks to the festival had her restlessly excited.

I never saw an Ahmar festival back in Vassilios...

The more she grew used to living in Kreuz, the more trouble she'd been having remembering her time back in her home village. But because she was so happy now, she was also able to remember that it wasn't all hard times back there. Right after she was exiled, just thinking about her village was painful and sad, so she had tried her hardest not to think about all the things she had lost. But lately, happy memories would unexpectedly pop up in her mind.

Now that I think of it, I did go to a festival with Rag... What god's festival was it again...?

On the other side of the street, a young boy and a man who was seemingly his father walked by, holding hands. Latina's gaze stopped on them, and she

tilted her head.

“That was the only time we left the temple, so... it must have been a different god than Banafsaj, right?”

Realizing she may have been getting overly serious, Latina shook her head from side to side, then started walking towards Chloe’s house again.

The main street through the eastern district was far more crowded than usual, making it difficult to even walk in a straight line. But the second Latina detoured onto a backstreet, the number of people around dwindled. That was proof that there were a lot of outsiders who didn’t know the intricate layout of the town.

While feeling like she could somehow breathe easier, Latina continued further down the path.

When she arrived at the crafting district, she found that it was as quiet as usual (though the sounds of the craftsmen working weren’t exactly quiet, and they could be heard from the houses all around), as if the excitement of the festival hadn’t reached this far.

Latina approached her friend’s house, which she had grown used to visiting, and knocked on the door.

“Welcome, Latina! Come on in!”

“Pardon me!”

Chloe guided Latina in past her workplace and to her bedroom.

“Sylvia’s already here.”

“Sorry, am I late?”

“Not at all. She said she finished up her work early and didn’t feel like going home, so she’s been hanging out here.”

As if to support Chloe’s statement, when they entered her room, they found Sylvia with her legs rudely sprawled out. When she saw Latina, she broke in a smile reminiscent of their school days.

“Long time no see, Sylvia!”

“Latina! It really has been a while. You... haven’t really changed, have you?”

“Where were you looking just now?” As she questioned that comment, Latina’s eyes were tearing up.

Feeling the palpable aura coming off of Latina, Sylvia averted her gaze.

“It really has been a while. You look like you’re doing well!” Sylvia said, starting over after facing Latina again, acting as if nothing had happened. Latina smiled back at her friend.

“You seem a bit more grown up, Sylvia.”

“Hehehe... It’s because I’m gathering all sorts of new information everyday

in the temple of Akhdar.”

As her friend said that with a wide, mischievous grin, Latina thought that she hadn’t changed much since back when they were in school.

“Hehehe! I brought all sorts of things today!”

“Hmm?”

“Now then, Latina... the clothing you ordered is finished!”

“Right! I’ve been really looking forward to it!”

Not realizing that Chloe and Sylvia had exchanged eye contact, Latina broke out in a gentle smile. After taking the new clothes from Chloe, Latina started excitedly changing. It wasn’t as if she didn’t find it embarrassing to change in front of others, but right now she saw Chloe as an artisan. She was carefully checking to make sure the measurements and finishing touches had all turned out right.

While in the midst of that, Chloe’s hands stopped while checking one particular spot. As she checked by taking measurements, she at last realized that Latina really had been growing.

“Sorry, Latina... You really have been getting bigger...” Chloe apologized for having doubted Latina’s constant insistence on the matter.

“I’m still in my growth period.”

Latina puffed up her cheeks in response to her friend’s words, like she’d done since she was very young.

After that exchange, Chloe and Sylvia started looking over the wide spread of items that Sylvia had brought.

“What should we go with?”

“For starters... Hmm, Latina’s pretty pale, so maybe we should go with one, brighter tone than mine...”

“Hey, why won’t you let me see the mirror?”

“Hehehe... Chloe, this is pretty fun, isn’t it?”

“Right? You don’t get to play with such excellent products very often.”

“What? Huh?”

“I think pink would be better for Latina than orange, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Hehehe...”

“What is it? Hey, seriously, what are you doing?”

While Chloe and Sylvia chattered away, enjoying themselves greatly, more and more things were smeared across Latina’s face. In addition to wearing a new dress, Latina was also in the midst of having her makeup done for the first time in her life. However, her two friends wouldn’t let her see a mirror as they toyed

with her in all sorts of ways. To Chloe and Sylvia, being able to dress up such a beauty however they liked was like an evolved version of playing with dolls and a wholly unique opportunity.

They were both at that age where, if they were dealing with any normal beauty, they'd end up feeling jealous and maybe even slander her. However, Latina was beyond that level of beauty. It was like she was in a whole different dimension, so it felt frankly stupid to envy her, and they couldn't help but accept that they'd never measure up. And yet, their childhood friend was also a natural airhead. She was often somehow out of it, and it felt dangerous to leave her on her own. They couldn't possibly hate her.

Above all else, ever since they were younger Chloe and Sylvia had been well aware that Latina always had her eyes on someone older. It was only natural for them to cheer on their friend, who tried her hardest and pushed herself to act more mature than she was.

"Yeah!"

"Yeah!"

There was a weird vibe between the two of them, and Chloe and Sylvia gave each other a double high-five. Having been left out, Latina stared at the two of them with an uneasy expression on her face. She wanted an explanation.

Latina had started working young, and because of her prudent nature and lack of wasteful habits as well as the fact that her guardian, Dale, took care of their living expenses, she had plenty of money saved up. She could have easily purchased her own makeup. The reason she hadn't up until now was because it was hard to express an interest in such things in front of Dale, who still treated her like a child. She also considered the less direct method of asking Rita, but she was always busy with work and childcare, so Latina wasn't able to press her to make time to join her and help her shop. She'd made it all the way to the front of a cosmetics store before, but she ultimately got nervous and couldn't bring herself to enter. It was just too new of an experience, so she'd had no idea what to do or even what type of makeup to choose.

She couldn't bring this up with her usual conversation partner, Kenneth, either. Asking him would probably just leave him bewildered and embarrassed.

She'd discussed the matter with her friends, so the well-informed Sylvia had taken the lead and ended up bringing a set of makeup along with her today.

The latest crazes and trends were also included amongst the information gathered by the temple of Akhdar where Sylvia served, and half of those who served in the temple were women. As a result, information on the latest fashion

naturally gathered in the temple of Akhdar, which had deeper contact with the outside world than the other temples.

Sylvia was well informed on the latest makeup techniques. Chloe was also much better informed on such matters than Latina. Skillfully applying the latest cosmetics, they finished their work on the greatest model imaginable, then turned to one another with a look of satisfaction and joy.

“My, this girl really is a beauty.”

“I feel like even if we weren’t so skilled, her natural beauty would still end up shining through.”

“Come on, Latina, smile!”

“Hey, seriously, let me know how it turned out...!”

Latina finally managed to snatch the mirror away from her two smirking friends. Peering into it, she was so shocked she couldn’t speak. The eye makeup gave her long eyelashes and big grey eyes even more impact. With muted tones used on the rest of the face, the whole look was balanced and not over the top. Her cheeks were faintly colored, like her face was flushed. There was light-pink lipstick on her slightly open lips, making them sparkle a bit more glamorously than usual.

She couldn’t be a full-on adult, but her lovely face could no longer be mistaken for that of a child.

Chloe and Sylvia were satisfied with their work.

“My face... it’s so thick...!”

The comment she got out after staring at her own face in the mirror was as regrettable as always. The disheartening nature of her statement was likely a result of the person who had raised her.

After finishing Latina’s makeup, the three girls headed outside, chatting noisily all the while.

“Ugh... I feel embarrassed somehow...” Latina was the last one out of Chloe’s house, and she looked a little troubled as she stared down at the ground.

“What’ve you got to be embarrassed about?”

“It’s because she’s Latina.”

Latina’s face was different than normal. She felt like someone would point that out, which felt strangely awkward. The people around her would have no reason to pay that any mind, but because she wasn’t accustomed to it, she was on edge.

Aware of Latina’s personality, her friends broke out in cheerful laughter.

“Well, it’s true that other people may end up looking at you more than usual.”

“Wha?!”

“That’s true. So you shouldn’t let it bug you so much now, right?”

“Do I really look strange?”

“Hehehe...”

“Mwahaha...”

“What’s with that laugh?!”

While her two friends enjoyed Latina’s reactions that made teasing her so worth it, the three girls headed toward the center of town where the temple of Ahmar was.

Along the way, they stopped here and there all over town.

The eastern district was terribly crowded, thanks in part to the shops offering sales and promotions aimed at the throngs of sightseers out and about. Even though the girls had no intention of buying anything, they spent time enjoying just pointing out items to one another and smiling.

Chloe stopped, seeing a number of reasonably priced items on display in the storefront of an accessory shop she’d normally never enter. Everyone hemmed and hawed, trying to carefully decide on the best item for their budget.

In a different accessory store, Latina picked out a ribbon and held it out for her two friends to see. It would also go with her normal outfits, but thanks to her friends recommending she go with something a little more mature than usual, she ended up going with a black ribbon made from a lovely fabric.

It was still too early for the start of the festival, so the three friends decided to divert from their route a bit on the way, stopping in at a thriving bakery. In addition to the store itself being packed, the additional stand they set up in front was also crowded. The three girls smiled at their childhood friend who was standing there busily working away.

“You look busy, Marcel.”

“Hi Latina, Chloe, Sylvia. It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Sylvia?”

His gentle tone of voice hadn’t changed since they were young, but his hands kept on briskly working away as he spoke. He was selling simple sandwiches meant for light meals aimed at sightseers here for the festival. Even while he was chatting, the speed at which he assembled the sandwiches for customers’ orders didn’t slow at all.

There were no sharp edges to be seen on the somewhat short, round-faced Marcel. The food he was selling as he wore his apron and a gentle expression looked absolutely delicious.

Marcel was fully aware of the impression he gave off. That was precisely

why on days like this, he'd work outside the shop instead, taking the initiative to act as a billboard for the store. This bakery heir had a promising future ahead of him.

"Are you all going to see the festival?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"You seem busy, Marcel," said Sylvia.

In response, Marcel broke out in an awkward smile as he smeared mustard on some bread.

"That's right. We're always busy, but this year one of the people who works in the shop took leave to have a baby, so we're short on hands... Ah, here you go, thanks for waiting."

Marcel handed the customer a sandwich made with a heaping helping of sliced veggies and meat between two pieces of the bread the shop prided itself on. It looked truly delicious.

It was just the right time for everyone to start getting hungry, so as they headed into the start of the festival, people sought to fill that desire.

"It doesn't look like I'll be able to make it this year. Will Anthony be going?"

"Anthony?"

"Yeah. His dad works at the lord's manor, after all. He knows a lot about how the festival is set up and should be able to recommend spots worth seeing... Ah, here, this is on the house."

Chloe graciously accepted the three sandwiches that Marcel offered with a smile.

"Thank you!"

"Thanks!"

"Is it really alright, Marcel?"

"It's fine, it's fine. But if you could, please eat them near the shop. Do you need something to drink?"

Latina tilted her head at Marcel's words, but by the time they'd finished eating in front of the shop, there was a long line in front of the stand. The young heir to the shop had correctly realized that a first-rate beauty happily eating the shop's goods would be great publicity.

After saying their farewells to Marcel, the three girls headed to the town's central plaza. Unsurprisingly, it was far more crowded than usual. They hurried along as the sun started to go down, the sky awash in beautiful sunset colors.

In Latina's everyday life, she rarely had an opportunity to visit the temple of Ahmar. Unlike the temple of Azraq, which served as a bank, and the temple of

Asfar that everyone attended as a child, there was little reason for your average citizen to go there. However, she did occasionally see the warrior priests who served there about town. The guardsmen who served the local lord were the ones tasked with keeping public order in Kreuz, but as Ahmar was the god in charge of law, his warrior priests worked together with the guards to suppress incidents about town.

“Where’s Anthony?”

“Hehehe... Before that, I heard from one of my elders that you can apparently check out the warrior priests over this way before the ceremony begins.”

“Huh... you mean like behind the scenes?”

“That’s right.”

After looking in the direction that Sylvia had pointed out while giggling, the three looked at one another and then headed off that way. They felt like they were doing something wrong as they acted in secret, their hearts beating loudly in their chests.

A large number of warrior priests were lined up in an orderly manner behind the temple of Ahmar, but as it was just before the main event, a hurried enthusiasm filled the air. What they were doing wasn’t a crime, but even so, the three girls held their breath and kept their voices low as they watched.

“Seeing them closer like this, the warrior priest uniforms are all a bit different.”

“You’re right.”

“That’s true... It’s supposed to vary a bit based on which squad they belong to.”

Just sneakily talking like this was fun. Adults would think nothing of what they were doing or their topic of discussion, but to the young girls, each and every moment of this was precious.

“Wow. That guy is pretty cool, isn’t he?”

“Which one?”

“There, that one with the two lines on his shoulder... With the dark-brown hair...”

“Hmm... So that’s the kind of person you like, Sylvia?”

“Eh, don’t you think the blond guy over there is cool?”

“Hmm... That guy’s no good. He’s caused problems by hitting on women all over town.”

“Where did you hear that from, Sylvia?”

“Hehehe...”

The girls enjoyed themselves greatly as they had this conversation fitting for girls their age. Latina also joined in, but her friends felt no need to ask about her tastes. The person she was interested in was already set, and she also wasn't the sort to judge people based on appearances. Latina had her ability to sense danger, too, so she based her judgments more on what was inside.

It was very difficult to measure up to her standards.

"Shall we get going?" Chloe asked.

"Yeah!" Latina responded with a nod, and the girls headed for the central plaza, where the main event was being held. Looking at the backs of the three girls walking through the crowd, you could almost feel the excitement coming off them.

†

Anthony was still enrolled in advanced schooling. He wore a forced smile on his face as he stood near the lord's manor because he was surrounded by his father's coworkers and superiors. His father may have been a low-level official at the lord's manor, but that didn't mean that Anthony was guaranteed the same post after graduating. However, it wasn't as if the possibility didn't exist. In order to raise those odds even a bit, his father was taking him along to make the rounds.

"Anthony!"

Hearing that voice call his name for the first time in a while, Anthony turned around.

"Long time no see, Anthony!"

There was no mistaking the owner of that voice.

Latina was standing there with an innocent smile that hadn't changed since they were young. Chloe and Sylvia were behind her.

He soon realized what was going on. Since he was surrounded by adults they didn't know, it should have been difficult for his friends to call out to him. That's why they had chosen to use Latina. Sylvia was likely the instigator.

Latina didn't seem to realize it herself, but her appearance was extraordinary and impactful enough to silence the people around her. In fact, his father and the other adults were standing there befuddled, absentmindedly staring.

"Dad, these are my friends I attended Asfar primary school with." He made sure to emphasize they were friends because, in several ways, he was worried about his own safety.

“Huh... Wuh...?”

It seemed that Anthony’s father had recognized Chloe. Their houses were near one another, and they’d played together since they were young, so he was of course familiar with the girl.

“...This is the ‘Fairy Princess.’”

He mentioned his friend’s nickname with a sigh, and only to his father, but the other adults nearby also started to murmur.

“Wha...? She’s the one from the rumors...?”

“So she really exists...?”

Apparently, his childhood friend was on the same level as some kind of mythological beast or urban legend. Rumors of her had even reached the lord’s manor.

In the town of Kreuz, the trends amongst adventurers were very important. As so much of their support was focusing in on a single person, the officials serving under the lord who ruled this town naturally paid her heed.

Adventurers possessed an excessive amount of armed might. They obviously needed to keep an eye on anyone who could cause them to revolt. However, in the case of the “Fairy Princess,” the guardsmen serving at the lord’s manner reported that she was harmless, so she wasn’t viewed as a concern.

None of the officials serving in the lord’s manner could have imagined that a captain of the guards was the leader of one of her fanclubs, or that just hearing the girl call out “Captain” was enough to make him break out in a wide grin.

Latina primarily kept to the southern district, where the Dancing Ocelot was, and the commercial sector that was the eastern district. She never visited the western district, where most of the officials lived, and the people who lived there would never go to a shop that served ruffians, like the Ocelot. That was why Latina’s existence was nothing more than a rumor to them.

“We visited Marcel’s place before coming here. He said we’d find you here.” Latina may have looked more mature in general, but the way she broke out in a wide smile hadn’t changed at all.

“It really has been a while, guys. I’m glad that you all seem to be doing alright.”

“You’ve gotten taller, Anthony.”

“Doesn’t it make you somehow angry, having him look down on us like this?”

“He can’t stop growing, but I suppose it’ll be fine as long as he gets down on his hands and knees, right?”

“It seems you two really haven’t changed at all, Chloe and Sylvia.”

As a man, he should have had the advantage in terms of height and build, but for some reason he felt like he couldn’t win against these two. Anthony started sweating mentally.

“I’ve always come with Dale, so I don’t really know the best way to see the festival. And Marcel said you may have a good idea of where to go...”

“Ah, I see... With just you girls, it’d be dangerous to go to places where adventurers gather...”

Every year that Latina had gone to see the night festival, it had been with Dale. He’d slipped through the crowd, occasionally letting the young girl ride on his shoulders to better see the festivities. There had also been years when they’d slipped into the viewing seats thanks to an acquaintance who had a spot there. However, they couldn’t use such methods today.

“Being with the Ocelot regulars is no different from being with Dale,” Latina said, pouting and puffing up her cheeks, taking Anthony’s words in a different way than he’d intended.

“What’s wrong with Latina?” Anthony whispered to the girl he’d known longest, only for Chloe to give an awkward laugh and then quietly respond, “Everyone at Latina’s place worries about her. Apparently, she was given all sorts of warnings about today’s outing.”

“Ah, I see.”

“They’re probably just worried because Latina’s so oblivious, but still...”

Anthony was overcome by a pleasant feeling while talking with them. It was an intimate, familiar sort of conversation that he’d forgotten, since it had been so long.

“I’ll ask my dad. If you don’t mind, I think it’d probably be good to hang out around here.”

Anthony had said that because he realized his father and the other adults had a keen interest in the rumored Fairy Princess. He was also aware that if he let his childhood friend wander about aimlessly and, on the off chance, something was to happen, it would lead to absolute chaos.

“Let me introduce you, Dad. This is Latina. She lives in a shop with an Akhdar flag.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Latina. I was born in a place without family names, so my apologies for just giving my first name.”

“And this is Sylvia Fal. She’s the daughter of Vice-Captain Fal of the guardsmen.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

In response to the girls’ smiles, the people from the lord’s manor invited them to watch the festival alongside them, just as Anthony had expected.

This decision of Anthony’s was one that served to secretly maintain the peace of Kreuz.

The main festivities of the night festival kicked off when the sun started to set. That was because it was the time in which the world was most awash in the color symbolic of Ahmar.

The warrior priests of Ahmar marched through Kreuz in an orderly procession, wearing polished armor that reflected the light of the torches they held. The orderly march of these brave soldiers who were the pride of the god of war was enough to captivate on its own, but amidst the procession were also priestesses wearing fluttering, thin silk and offering prayers for victory in battle in the form of a dance, making the sight all the more brilliant. With the movements of their slender arms, the priestesses freely manipulated the deep-crimson silk, which was embroidered with gold thread. The afterimage of the firelight reflecting off the gold hung in the air, sparkling.

The swaying, flickering flames that lit up the town were the very symbol of their creed: While the guilty may be able to hide their deeds in the darkness, there is nowhere to hide in the presence of Ahmar. And so they lit up a great number of bonfires, transforming the normally silent night of the town into a sea of light.

“It’s amazing...”

Having secured a safe vantage point to watch from, the girls watched this special sight without needing to worry about being pushed or obstructed by the crowds.

Though there were a great number of people about, this was still essentially a religious ritual, so there weren’t many people truly cutting loose and causing an uproar. But it was still enough of a clamor that it would be hard to hear someone speaking without getting face to face with them.

The girls were enjoying this unusual atmosphere, with the commotion washing over the crowd like waves. It may have been thanks to it being such a special event that Chloe managed to bring up a topic she wouldn’t normally discuss with her friend.

“Hey, Latina.”

“What is it?”

“When are you going to confess your love?”

Latina’s voice choked up in response to Chloe’s words. It was hard to tell the reaction Latina was having by looking at her face, lit up by the red flames.

“That’s right. Why haven’t you done it yet? I haven’t heard anything about him having any special ladies in his life. So what are you holding back for?” Sylvia joined in, causing Latina to look down in embarrassment.

“I’ve already said it,” Latina asserted in a slightly childish tone. “I’m *always* saying it. I tell Dale that I love him... that I love him more than anyone else... that he’s special to me, more so than anybody else... But my feelings never get through to him...”

She’d held these feelings in her heart, never changing, for quite some time now, and she’d tried to express those feelings over and over.

Latina continued to tell her friends how she felt, her ears so red that it would’ve been blatantly apparent if they weren’t so near a bonfire.

“To Dale, I’m still just his ‘little Latina’... so he just doesn’t get it. No matter how much I say I love him or that he’s special to me... it doesn’t reach him.”

She didn’t know what to do when her words of love wouldn’t reach him. Just saying she loved him wasn’t enough. Even saying she loved him most of all, in a different way than she did others. Even with all those words added up, she still couldn’t reach him, so what could she do? And why weren’t those feelings reaching him?

She’d long since searched for the answer to that question, and she’d determined that she needed to be an adult. She thought that even if her words wouldn’t reach him when she was a child, if she grew bigger and became an adult, they would.

The gap between their ages was large, so she’d tried her hardest to act grown up, but she still hadn’t reached him.

Even so, she at least wanted to be seen as a proper woman so she could at least convey her feelings.

“Latina.”

Chloe, who was sitting by her side, squeezed Latina’s hand tight. Chloe held back her words, but their other friend spoke them without hesitation.

“Is that really all?”

“...Sylvia?”

“You understand why you haven’t been able to get through to him, right, Latina? But... you’re scared, aren’t you.”

“Huh...?”

“It’s because things won’t be able to stay the way they’ve been up until now.”

Latina looked shocked in response to Sylvia’s words; more so than just because her friend had hit the mark, it was because those words made her realize she’d been harboring such feelings in her heart.

“I...”

While Latina was shaken, she was able to regain her composure thanks to Chloe silently snuggling close to her. As her friend, Chloe knew full well that Latina feared losing the people close to her above all else.

“...Maybe that’s the case,” Latina concluded after a while.

“Yeah, probably,” Sylvia affirmed.

Chloe, meanwhile, just offered her silent support.

“What you need to convey your feelings isn’t to become an adult; you need the resolve to risk destroying your current relationship.”

“I see...”

Her time spent together with that beloved person, being treated as his “adorable little daughter,” helped hold her together up until now, and that time was incredibly precious and pleasant to her. But if she wished for a different relationship with him, she first needed to be willing to let that change.

“But, is it alright...? Is it really okay for me to tell Dale that I love him...?”

Sylvia almost called Latina out for those timid words, but held back when she saw the girl’s pained expression.

“...Latina?” Chloe said, looking concerned.

“I’m a devil, so... no matter how hard I try, I’ll never be a human... And so...”

“You’re still Latina, and being a devil is part of that,” Chloe said, unable to hold that back because she knew what Latina had done in the past.

“Right... but I’m still worried. The time I spend together with Dale is the same, but it flows differently for each of us. So even if I tell Dale and he accepts me in spite of that, I know that he’ll suffer, because he’s so kind.”

In her mind, she realized that fact. And yet, she’d continued to avert her gaze

from it.

Eventually, her time together with the people precious to her would come to an end. Everyone would grow old and pass away, leaving her all alone. She couldn't avoid or escape it, but because she was happy now, she didn't want to think about that fact.

"And also... it's not easy for devils to have children." Latina looked like she was about to break out in tears as she voiced that fact. "Dale really has given me all sorts of things. And yet, even if Dale accepts my feelings... I won't be able to give him a child."

Latina knew that Dale loved kids. It wasn't just that he'd taken her in when she was young and raised her. No matter what he may have said at the Ocelot, he certainly didn't seem to mind watching Theo, and when he heard that his younger brother back home had a child, he broke out in a gentle smile.

And so she knew that she shouldn't want to be the one to stand by his side when she couldn't give him a child of his own.

Those thoughts had long since been eating away at Latina.

Just then, she felt a *plonk* on her head.

"Ow!"

She looked up in surprise, only to find her friend's angry face looking back at her.

"Latina, you dummy!"

The girl once more landed a chop on Latina's head. Latina looked dumbfounded by this attack, which made Chloe give an awkward smile entirely void of malice.

"You're so smart, so why do your thoughts go in such bad directions?"

"Chloe..."

"It's not like it's rare for there to be married couples without children, even amongst two humans. And yet, they're still able to live happy lives, right?"

"But..."

"A pathetic guy who'd judge a woman based on something stupid like that isn't worthy of my best friend in the first place!"

Latina's expression shifted from surprise to a different emotion. Realizing that, Sylvia hurriedly spoke up. "No! You can't cry, Latina! You'll ruin your makeup!"

"There's someone you want to show that off to when you get back, right?"

"...Yeah."

Latina pointed her face upwards so her hot tears wouldn't flow, and she

gripped the hands of her friends by her side tightly so that she wouldn't forget her memories of this night or the warmth of this moment.

"...Dale isn't a 'pathetic guy.'"

"Right."

"In that case... you should give it all you've got."

After Latina made up her mind, the festival headed into its climax. Flames made with magic danced about the center of town like a living being, scattering about sparks all the while. The excitement and clamor rose as everyone felt the hot air coming off the flames on their skin.

In the midst of all this, Sylvia wore a mischievous smile fitting of her personality, looking like she was plotting something.

"Hey, Latina. Races with long lifespans do have lower birth rates, but it's not like you *can't* have a child."

"But..."

"In that case, shouldn't you get into a relationship as soon as possible, to raise those odds even a little bit?"

"Huh?"

"That's true. You should go for it tonight, Latina."

"Wah?!" Thanks to her friends' reckless suggestions, Latina forgot all about her tears and instead let out that panicked shriek.

The festival came to a close with fireworks made of large-scale fire magic. Fitting of a festival dedicated to Ahmar, they were all red, but it was still impossible to look at anything but the large flaming flowers in the sky.

Everyone in the massive crowd gazed straight up.

In the midst of all this, Latina suddenly felt like she heard someone call out to her and turned around. Seeing her do this, her friends tilted their heads.

"What is it, Latina?"

"Um... Just now, I thought..."

When Latina turned around, she saw the people from the lord's manor who had given them their spot. She tilted her head a bit when she saw her childhood friend Anthony amongst them. Next to him were a number of men wearing guard uniforms. However, they looked much more fragile than the regulars who visited the Ocelot.

"Guards?"

"Gah!"

While Latina just looked innocently bewildered, Sylvia was clearly making a face.

Sylvia's father was a vice-captain of Kreuz's guardsmen. While they were commoners, Sylvia came from a family of high enough status that she'd had a rather strict and formal upbringing. Now that she had experienced the outside world by living in the temple of Akhdar, her life in that house felt suffocating. And to her, anyone serving as a guardsman was just a subordinate of her father, who was symbolic of her familial home.

One of the guardsmen talking to Anthony turned their way and then stopped cold. He seemed shocked to find the girls looking at him. The other guards by his side also looked surprised, but their reactions gave off a slightly different impression.

Thinking maybe there was something strange behind her, Latina turned around to check, but she only found the backs of the crowd looking up at the night sky rather than anything surprising, so she tilted her head again.

"Isn't that Rudy?" Chloe asked.

"Huh?" Latina looked back at the guard. It was then that she finally realized that the guardsman talking to Anthony was her childhood friend.

"Ah."

"It is! So he graduated from the reserve corps, then?" Sylvia whispered.

Before one could become an official guardsman in Kreuz, they needed to undergo training and education in the reserve corps. Once their abilities were recognized, they were allowed to wear a guard uniform and be placed on duty. There were ranks within the guardsmen, but as they were just an organization in a single town, it wasn't as complicated as it was in a large army.

It felt like their still unreliable-looking childhood friend had been jammed into a uniform. His slender physique made it clear that he was still growing. Still, his body was well-proportioned, making it obvious that he'd been properly training himself. He'd been bigger than his friends when they were young, but as everyone matured, he ended up no longer standing out. In fact, in terms of height alone, Anthony now surpassed him.

Latina headed towards her childhood friend, whom she hadn't seen in quite some time. She walked along with a *pitter-patter*, unchanged since when she was little. She was curious by nature, so when something caught her interest, she approached without hesitation.

"Long time no see, Rudy. You look well," Latina said while approaching him, a smile with some youthfulness remaining in it on her face. Rudy wore an awkward expression in response.

"Could you stop calling me 'Rudy' already?" her childhood friend responded

without even greeting her, his voice even lower than she remembered. Latina tilted her head.

“But Rudy, you’re *Rudy*. Right?”

“At my age, a childish nickname like that is a bit...”

“Rudolph?”

Latina said his full name a little awkwardly, not being used to saying it, and for some reason, he froze up again, despite being the one who had told her to use it.

“Hmm... that feels strange, somehow.” Latina crinkled her brow a bit as she muttered that, but then her expression returned to normal. “Can’t I just call you Rudy?”

“...Do what you want.” Unable to look Latina in the face when she was so close, Rudolph averted his gaze. His other old friends, meanwhile, wore lukewarm expressions.

“It looks like his body’s the only thing that grew up. Guess there’s no helping that, though, since it *is* Rudy we’re talking about.”

“It looks like even reserve corps training can’t fix a good-for-nothing like him. Seems there’s just no helping Rudy.”

“Chloe, Sylvia, it’s not fair to put too many expectations on him. He is Rudolph, after all.”

“Right, that’d be *awful*!”

“That’s true!”

“Hey! I can hear you! Wait, are you even trying to hide it?!”

He didn’t break out in tears, but even so, it was hard to see much growth in Rudolph as he retorted with that.

It was Anthony who had approached the guards. This was because he knew that on the off chance some hoodlums were to assault the “Platinum Fairy Princess” or some lecher were to catcall her, it’d become a serious incident. Most likely, the perpetrator would never make it out of town alive.

Anthony knew the “guardians” around her well, so he was aware that ordinary folks tended to mistakenly think of all adventurers as inherently terrifying. But when it came to a particular doting idiot, such judgments weren’t necessarily off the mark.

Things were more dangerous for Latina than she herself realized. She may have been a magic user, giving her some definite firepower, but if she lost her voice from fear or shock, she wouldn’t be able to properly cast it. Then she’d just have her slender, frail body to fight back with. And yet, these girls intended

to wander around all on their own at night, when the town was full of even more outsiders than usual.

Anthony figured he needed to make a move, to protect the peace and tranquility of the town. And so, he'd gone to where the guardsmen were stationed in order to discuss the matter with them. They ended up exceeding even Anthony's expectations by offering up a number of fresh graduates from the reserve corps. This was a result of an alignment between the captain, who was worried about the safety of the Fairy Princess, and the vice-captain, who was concerned about his daughter, who seemed to not want to come back home as of late. It was a pure abuse of authority, but there was nobody who could point that out right now.

Rudolph ended up in the dispatched group, thanks to the intentions of his superiors. There wasn't anybody in the guards' upper brass who didn't know who he had feelings for. And as a result, he'd gotten *plenty* of attention since he entered the reserve corps four years ago.

Perhaps thanks to the influence of her guardian and her mentor, the regulars' beloved Fairy Princess tended to be closer to the adventurers. To the guardsmen regulars, this had been terribly disappointing; but then a childhood friend of the Fairy Princess joined their ranks. If she fell for the boy, then she'd make frequent visits to the guard station, and greet them all with an adorable smile, and maybe even occasionally bring lunch and say, "Please have some, everyone." And so those men moved on the desire for such days to come. That was why Rudolph's superiors worked him so hard, realizing full well that he was at a disadvantage. After all, if he couldn't at least avoid being immediately wiped out by her guardian, he'd never get anywhere.

From the point of view of those watching over her, it was annoying, but, well, it was better to back someone they could beat into shape. At any rate, this made a living hell for the boy himself, but he himself had chosen to walk this path of thorns to begin with.

"So you're a proper guard now, right, Rudy? When did that happen?"

"It only just happened. They were short-handed for the night festival, so they rounded up us newcomers."

"Are the people behind you new, too? I haven't seen them at the shop."

"...The guardsmen who are regulars in the shop are pretty much all in high positions."

"Hmm... Nice to meet you. I'm Latina, from the Ocelot in the southern district. I've been friends with Rudy since we were kids."

Latina pointed a smile at the other young men, ignoring Rudolph's attempt to avoid saying the name of the Ocelot. There was a bit of a gap in their ages, but these young men who had been promoted to official guards were still clearly taken aback by Latina's appearance.

To be honest, Rudolph was shocked himself. He was aware that the girl he'd had feelings for since they were young was cute, but in the time that they hadn't seen one another, she'd grown more and more beautiful in his memories.

His reserve corps training had been harsh, causing him to always keep his mind on what lay ahead. He got the feeling that he was getting worked harder than his fellow trainees, but he couldn't quite call it unreasonable hazing, so it was hard to bring the matter up.

Despite all that, Latina had grown even more beautiful than he'd imagined. Even his colleagues were at a loss for words upon seeing her. In the predominantly male guardsmen, they'd often discuss how the waitress at some bar was a looker, or how they'd seen a real sexy woman at such-and-such a place. But Latina was on a whole other level.

She was too radiant to look straight at her.

But as always, she had no self-awareness of that fact.

"Wow!" Latina exclaimed as she stared up at the final firework blooming beautifully as it lit up the night sky. It was only natural that Rudolph grew stiff from nervousness as he stared at her expression from the side.

The magical fireworks came to a close, signaling the end of this special night's festivities.

The townsfolk all headed back towards their own homes, still all abuzz, while the travelers headed to their lodgings for the night. There were also some folks who headed to the bars, which were open later than usual to accommodate the festival-goers.

The girls exchanged their farewells, too.

"Well then, see you later."

"Right! Come visit the shop, okay?"

While Sylvia wore an indifferent smile, the new guards who heard she was the daughter of their vice-captain had terribly stiff expressions on their faces. With them accompanying her, Sylvia headed for the western district. Apparently, she wanted to head straight home today.

"You too, Chloe."

"Yeah. Keep it together, Latina!" her friend said with a smile.

Latina headed to the southern district together with Rudolph. She'd left her

clothing and other belongings at Chloe's house, so she'd tell her everything that happened when she went to pick it up later.

Having been left behind, Chloe turned to the young man by her side with an awkward smile and said, "Sorry. Looks like you just happened to get stuck escorting the leftovers."

"...Not at all. A mission is a mission, after all."

As Chloe wore a bright, cheerful expression, she may not have been as stunningly beautiful as Latina was, but she was still plenty charming. While Latina may have been a peerless beauty, she didn't have an inferiority complex regarding her appearance, and instead pushed her ample chest out with pride, having a different sort of "charm" than her friend.

As to what that young man thought of Chloe's smile as he walked a step behind her, only he himself knew.

Latina stared at Rudolph as she walked by his side, unable to hide her curiosity.

"Was the reserve corps training rough?"

"Yeah."

"I see. You're really strongly built, Rudy. You look much burlier than the novice adventurers who come to the shop."

Latina's smile was innocent and unguarded. And because she was so dense in regards to what the people around her thought of her, that was all the more dangerous.

Ever since she was young, she had only ever chased after a single person. As a result, she was dense when it came to noticing the interest of the people around her, and thanks to the person she had feelings for treating her like a child, her self-esteem was low. That she'd been exiled from her home village didn't help with that matter, either. And on top of that, she was sensitive to the good will of others. Thanks to her ability to tell when people wanted to do her harm, she was well attuned to picking up on hostility. As a result, she was also good at picking up on its polar opposite, good will. However, when it came to the *details* of that good will, she was incredibly dense.

Rudolph was vaguely aware of that aspect of Latina. He figured that wouldn't have changed, even if a few years had passed.

"What is it? You're not saying anything."

"It's nothing..."

"You're being weird."

Though she was letting off a dazzling charm, no crude men were brave

enough to approach when someone wearing a guard uniform was by her side. Even so, feeling a great number of gazes on Latina, including some improper ones, Rudolph kept watch around them with a threatening glare.

While a bit of light caused her long hair to sparkle, Latina stopped just a bit short of their destination.

Just a bit ahead, Dale was pacing about restlessly in the Dancing Ocelot, unable to calm down.

To be honest, he was getting in the way.

“I-Isn’t Latina a bit late?!”

“The fireworks just ended, right? The central plaza will be packed, so it’ll take some time for her to make it back. Plus, Latina said she was going to escort her friends back home,” Rita said with a sigh.

By opening up the windows, it was possible to see some of the fireworks in the night sky even from inside the Ocelot. This was done to offer up a bit of the festive atmosphere to the customers, even if they didn’t go to the actual event itself.

“I get that, but—”

“If you get it, then behave yourself already.”

No matter how sound Rita’s arguments were, Dale had no intention of mending his ways. He’d been like this ever since he returned to Kreuz after seeing off Gregor and Rose. Rita’s patience was reaching its limits.

“If you’re so worried, then you should just wait outside,” Kenneth said, looking frustrated. He could no longer stand the gloomy atmosphere.

Having been effectively kicked out of the Ocelot, Dale found the nighttime street to be far more crowded than usual. He took a few steps to go looking for Latina, only to realize it would be pointless if they accidentally just missed each other, so he turned back around. Feeling the ghastly atmosphere surrounding Dale as he stared while watching for the girl, the passersby were startled and kept their distance.

When he at last saw her figure approaching, a look of relief passed over Dale’s face, only for his expression to once more grow grim when he realized she wasn’t alone. He wasn’t familiar with the dress she was wearing, but there was no way Dale would ever mistake her. She was pointing a friendly smile to the boy her age beside her. To Dale, whether he was a guard or an adventurer made no big difference. Any young man ogling Latina was essentially vermin to him.

“Dale!” Latina shouted enthusiastically the second she saw him standing in

front of the Dancing Ocelot. Rudolph felt a painful ache in his heart when he heard the palpable joy in Latina's voice.

He knew all about Latina's feelings for Dale, so this much wouldn't cause him to lose heart.

He was getting glared at with more suspicion than when he'd visited the shop in the past as "one of her friends," and he felt a chill, but it wasn't enough that he couldn't stand it. Not realizing that he was only able to stand up to the aura like bloodlust coming off of Dale thanks to the hellish training he'd lived through, Rudolph pretended not to notice the sweat forming on his brow.

Latina hadn't realized that Dale was in a bad mood. To her, the person by her side was just her childhood friend, Rudy. There was nothing to feel guilty about in happily chatting away and walking alongside her friend, who she was seeing for the first time in a while.

Dale also knew that Latina wasn't the sort of girl who'd wander off with just anybody. Even so, he couldn't remain calm seeing her look so unguarded. His bad mood was the natural result of that concern.

"Latina." As a result, Dale's voice was harsh and firm. "You're back late."

Latina tilted her head, confused by Dale's words.

He wasn't actually upset with her actions. Thanks to her not having to escort her friends home, she'd made it back sooner than initially planned. However, despite those concerns being relieved, she'd returned with some man he didn't recognize, setting Dale off and causing the blood to rise to his head, making him unreasonable.

"Come on, hurry inside!"

In response to Dale practically treating her like a small child, Latina's expression grew murky. She was losing sight of reason as well.

It was her first time out at night alone, which had only enhanced the festival atmosphere. On top of that, being with her friends only fanned that further, making her far more excited than usual. But in response to Dale's bad mood, that swung around completely. Now, she was just plain angry.

"Dale, I'm not a little kid anymore."

"You know, kids are the only ones who say stuff like that."

"No, that's not it...!" She clenched her fists tight.

She still wasn't mentally prepared. But if she couldn't do it now, with the added push her friends had given her through the new mature dress and makeup, she felt like she never could.

She felt ready to take the first step forward towards changing their

relationship—to convey her feelings. To let him know that she was no longer his “little Latina.” That the love she wanted from him wasn’t the same as the parental affection he had for “little Latina.”

“I’m not a child anymore... and also...!”

Even so, she wasn’t able to look Dale straight in the face. She shut her eyes tight and did her best to proclaim the feelings in her heart as loudly as she could.

“I don’t want you to talk to me like that, Dale...! You’re not my father... I’ve never thought of you as a replacement for my father...!”

Hearing Latina say that as she turned pure red all the way to the tips of her ears was quite a shock for Rudy. Even if he was aware of how she felt, it was still painful to hear her voice it in front of his very eyes. However, as he was a step removed from the proceedings, he was the first one to realize what was going on.

“...Latina,” he called out, tapping her on the shoulder. However, Latina was so overwhelmed that she didn’t even realize the disaster unfolding before their eyes that Rudolph had tried to point out.

After a bit, Latina was unable to take the lack of reaction from Dale and finally slowly opened her eyes to look.

It was then that she finally realized.

Dale's face had gone ghastly pale.

As an adult who was older than her, Latina had always seen Dale as far more calm and composed than she was. This was the first time she'd ever seen the color drain from his face like this.

"Huh?"

She wanted to cry when she took a step towards Dale in surprise, only for him to take a step back as if trying to flee. Had her words been that hard for him to accept?

However, Dale was the one who wanted to break down in tears.

"Latina..."

The words that he squeezed out in a quivering voice told the whole story.

"Latina... is finally... in her rebellious phase...!"

In a way, that awful comment was perfectly fitting for him.

"Huh?"

A moment later, Latina realized the meaning of what Dale had muttered, and she let out a massive shriek of *Huuuuuuuuuh?!!* in her heart. It was so much of a shock that she couldn't even voice it.

Not realizing that Latina was internally screaming or that she had frozen up, Dale held his head in his hands and looked on the verge of tears. Latina felt like she was the one who should be doing that.

It was an absolute disaster.

"Awful..." Rudolph unthinkingly muttered. The other two had both fallen into a panic of their own and didn't hear him.

"Latina's finally hit that rebellious phase I've heard so much about...! From what I've heard, it happens when a girl hits puberty...! What should I do...? What should I do?!"

After saying that, Dale once more looked at Latina while wearing a terribly pathetic expression, then suddenly turned about-face. On top of everything else, he ended up fleeing the scene. He didn't stop running; his swiftness could bring no shame to his reputation as being a first-class adventurer.

Huuuuuuh?!

As Latina once more gave a flustered cry in her heart, Rudolph placed his hand on her shoulder. As he was just hanging on by a thread himself, he had no idea what to think of all this, but he ended up speaking without thinking. "Well... Good luck, I guess?"

"Waaaah!"

Rudolph thought that even for a parent and child, these two were strangely alike. Still, it wasn't like this wasn't his problem, and he didn't really have any room to talk.

Latina looked up at Rudolph, about to cry, and then an even more pathetic sound than the one Dale made earlier echoed through the town.

†

Dale thought that the moment he had dreaded for so long, wondering when it would arrive, had come at last. He hadn't thought so at first, but now he couldn't see the way Latina had been distancing herself from him as anything but an omen.

"My Latina... My adorable Latina has finally hit her rebellious phase...!" Dale yelled, his voice full of pain, as he bound into the Dancing Ocelot. Then, the power drained from him, and he collapsed. A moment later, several regulars slid over and surrounded him. They wore sympathy on their faces, but it was hard to see it as sincere, as there was something dark floating behind that.

"Well, girls her age are tricky."

"I've got it rough with mine, too."

As they called out to him, it felt more like they were stirring up Dale's anxieties than trying to comfort him.

"I got told not to do my laundry together with hers because my clothes stink."

"Even when I say I just bathed, she said my very existence stinks, so what can I do?!"

"It's no different for me! No matter how much my wife and kids may be pleasantly chatting away in the living room, the second I come in, they all hurriedly leave without saying a thing! The only one who will talk to me is our pet parrot!"

"I've got a complaint, too! After my long-term job ended and I finally made it home, my kids said, 'Welcome, sir' to me!"

"Drink up! Everything's on me today! I'll pay for it all! Drink as much as you want!" Dale yelled while crying in sympathy, riled up by the plight of fathers the world over.

Even if I'm a true hero, I'm still definitely a father dealing with being treated coldly by his daughter now that she's hit puberty!

That inner thought of Dale's was so deplorable that if anybody else were to hear it, they'd surely butt in with a "That isn't the kind of thing you should say

about yourself.”

“Rita!”

In the kitchen, Latina was clinging to Rita and sobbing.

“What’s wrong, Latina? You had your makeup done up beautifully, but it’ll be ruined like this.”

“Rita...! I... I confessed, to Dale...!”

“Confessed?”

The terrible spectacle that could be heard from the front of the shop was far removed from a joyous celebration of love. There wasn’t even a hint of such elegance to it.

“It was no good! I didn’t get through! He didn’t even realize I was confessing my love!”

“Ugh...”

“That idiot has really done it now” was clearly written on Rita’s face.

“It was so embarrassing, and now I can’t even look Dale in the face!”

Rita made a disgusted look as she stroked Latina’s head to comfort her, but that expression obviously wasn’t aimed at the girl in front of her now. Rita had known that this girl had seen her guardian as a member of the other sex ever since she was little. From Rita’s point of view, Dale was the strange one for not realizing that. Her husband Kenneth could be pretty dense as well, so she couldn’t help but wonder why men were all so stupid.

Well, after dealing with them for so long, Rita had come to realize that she shouldn’t expect much from adventurers in terms of tact and picking up on subtleties.

“Right, it is embarrassing. It’s real tough for a girl to confess her feelings.”

Rita gazed at Latina with a pained smile. Compared to how she treated the customers who visited the shop, Rita wore a much gentler face when dealing with this girl, who was like a little sister to her.

As a single child, Rita had no siblings. Despite being in a different role than Dale, it was only natural that she doted on the girl who had practically fallen into her lap all those years ago. Latina was like a personification of her thinking that she’d love to have a cute little sister from back when she was young. What was wrong with her seeking comfort from a young woman like Rita that the sort of guys she’d grown so used to dealing with couldn’t provide?

“It’s no surprise that you’d want to run away. And it’s perfectly natural to not want to see his face.”

Latina hadn’t said that she didn’t want to see his face, but from Rita’s point of

view, it was only natural to treat such an idiot so harshly.

“You don’t have to push yourself. I know how hard you’re always trying.”

“Rita...!”

While still holding the now full-on bawling Latina, Rita gestured toward the back.

“You need to make sure to take off your makeup properly. It’s bad for your skin if you don’t.”

“Right...”

After seeing Latina off to wash her face in the rear of the shop, Rita returned to the kitchen. Seeing her expression, Kenneth decided it was best that he didn’t say anything unnecessary.

The shop itself had descended into some sort of mad banquet. It was hard to tell just what had happened from Dale’s chaotic actions. In order to figure out what was going on, Kenneth went into the kitchen where Latina supposedly was, but when he saw his wife’s face, it became clear that it was Dale who had done something stupid.

“Rita...”

“Kenneth, I think Latina’s probably going to take some time off starting tomorrow. She’s always working so hard, so something like that should be fine every once in a while, right?”

Wasn’t today already a day off for Latina? Not letting that stupid thought appear on his face felt every bit as much of a dangerous task as anything he’d faced while he was still an active adventurer.

“Latina, head on up to your room, alright?”

His wife’s gentle expression as she turned around and faced the young girl with her drooped shoulders and tearstained face was practically that of a different person.

After seeing off Rita as she accompanied Latina up the stairs, Kenneth looked back into the shop, which was getting out of hand under the influence of the flow of alcohol, and let out a sigh. Adding in the new customers who were coming in after the close of the night festival, things were getting more and more chaotic.

In an entirely different meaning than when Rita looked at Latina, Kenneth’s expression looked like that of a different person as he gave a pity-filled sigh while he looked at his “little brother.”

After seriously drinking for once and causing an uproar, Dale returned to their room in the attic as usual, only to gulp at the dead silence awaiting him there.

He didn’t see Latina anywhere.

He timidly peeked under the covers. Dale thought for sure she’d be sulking in bed, but he found that it was cold and empty, causing his gaze to silently and nervously dart all about.

Perhaps he had missed the out-of-place feeling he should have picked up on when he climbed into the attic because he was drunk. Some of the items in the part of the attic used for storage had been shifted. The luggage that had been moved now formed a wall, separating off that section.

Dale was unable to speak up and tried to quietly peek inside, but as if to obstruct him from doing so, there was a partitioning screen set up in place of a door. It was the one that Latina normally used when she was changing.

That should have already told him all he needed to know, but even so, Dale steadied his breathing and searched carefully for her presence. Normally, there’d be no need for that, as he’d never mistake Latina’s presence, which only spoke to just how out of sorts Dale was.

Is this rebellious phase going to steal away all of my solace?!

Dale emitted a silent scream as something warm streamed from both his eyes, and the power drained from his body, causing him to collapse to his knees. The reason he stopped himself from voicing what he was feeling was because Latina was already asleep. That was proof of just how much of a hopeless, doting idiot he was.

A Certain Pup and the Time Before He Came to Town

Far from the center of Laband, deep in the mountains, there was a settlement. Thanks to the powerful blessing of Quirmizi, the god of the earth and the harvest, this mountain land was fertile and guaranteed good crops. All sorts of herbivores, big and small, lived there, including plenty of boar-type magical beasts as big as a house. That the deep forests there were enough to support the inexhaustible appetite of such creatures also spoke to the blessings of the god.

And since those magical beasts were so plentiful, there were also many other beasts that preyed on them.

Those other beasts, the soaring wolves, stood at the top of the food chain in this land.

“Sad.”

One of these greatest of beasts lay slumped on the ground, muttering in a monotonous tone.

“Sad,” the small beast repeated, clearly dissatisfied.

“What is it?” asked a larger beast with grey fur that resembled that of the small one, pointing his snout towards the cub.

“Latina, not here. Sad.”

“That child of man, is it? That youth had a pleasant smell to her.” The large grey-winged wolf gave a nod and stared off into the distance, his eyes narrowing. “Time has flowed on for quite some time since it was decided that we soaring wolves would live alongside man, but it was still our good fortune to have encountered such a rare child.”

Paying no heed to the majestically spoken words of his father, the cub slowly stood up.

“Daddy.”

“What is it?”

As the cub looked up at his father, the black tip of his tail wagged back and forth.

“Latina’s place, go.”

The father wolf smacked his cub with his tail, sending the child flying

through the air. With a single flap of his wings, the cub casually landed back on the ground.

“Daddy?”

“My child, you are still young. You still lack the strength needed to venture into the outside world.”

“No! Go.”

With a quick leap, the cub dodged the next swing of his father’s tail. However, unable to deal with the immediate follow-up, this time the cub was sent flying in the opposite direction.

“Latina’s place, go!”

“You are still too young.”

“Lots of petting, all for me!”

“Do not say such things that make me feel jealous!”

His true feelings unwittingly slipped out.

The fur of both father and cub was standing on end as they faced one another. Fluffy, shed tufts danced through the air between them. Shortly afterwards, they both scratched their necks with their hind legs at the same time. They were in sync, fitting of a father and cub. More puffs of fur floated through the air. For the two of them, just looking at the sight was enough to make them feel itchy.

“Ungh...” the father unthinkingly moaned.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t understand what his cub was saying. He couldn’t help but remember now that this season had come. It had been pure bliss when he was able to enjoy that girl’s miraculous skills. It was a pleasant sensation he had never experienced before, despite having lived far longer than any human.

But even so, he knew it was not acceptable to send his young child off into the domain of man. And since the cub was his child, he couldn’t simply turn a blind eye to him monopolizing that supremely blissful brushing all year round.

He was just a child.

And so, the cub unthinkingly let out *that* line:

“I’m telling Mommy.”

“How cowardly, to speak of this to your mother!”

The father’s voice broke, and he froze in response to his child’s words. In all times and places, regardless of race, a wife is always able to make her husband go pale.

“If you are willing to say all that, then show me proof that you have truly come of age.”

“Hmm?” The cub tilted his head in response.

This wolf who stood as the strongest of the pack and reigned over them was trying to change the topic because he needed to keep relationships with the females smooth in order to keep the pack unified. He earnestly explained to his cub just how important that was.

“Come of age?”

“We say that one has come of age when they are able to hunt their own prey. Come along; your father will now show you how it is done.”

The father stood up, then calmly started walking while wagging his tail. His cub followed a few steps behind him. The young cub got distracted by all sorts of things along the way. Growing tired of this, his father picked him up by the scruff of his neck halfway there and once more started walking. As he dangled limply and swayed along, held by his neck in his father’s mouth, the cub naturally grew docile. He just kept swaying along, even when his father spread out his wings and flew through the sky.

“Watch carefully,” he said to his cub, whom he set down in a tree, a massive boar magical beast down below them. To them, the issue was whether or not a beast was tasty and how much of a pain it would be to hunt it, as no other animals were dangerous to them. These particular beasts were easy to find, and they made for a fine meal. But in exchange, they possessed a power fitting to their massive size, meaning it wasn’t a matter of whether they were easy to hunt.

The cub could already hunt small animals. Since it served as both play and a means of gaining a snack, the soaring wolf young often passed their time going on such hunts in the mountains near the settlement. But that wasn’t enough to count as a true “hunt” for these beasts at the top of the food chain. It was only when one could hunt down prey that could sate the hunger of the whole pack that they were recognized as a strong male who had come of age.

Having left his cub at the top of the tree, the father wolf gently landed on the ground. He kept the flap of his wings to a minimum, and only made the slightest of sounds. He circled about to be downwind and in a blind spot of his prey.

“Oh wind.” While chanting, he tempered his mana.

Amongst magical beasts, there were some who were able to use magic. Those who came into contact with them explained it as the magical beasts being able to instinctually string together sounds that fulfilled the form of a chant. To such magical beasts, manipulating a chant was no different than a courtship ritual or an intimidation tactic, and they simply knew that if they howled in a certain way, something would happen. Even if they couldn’t understand the specifics, as long as the chant and the affinity were in alignment and they were able to use mana, it

was still possible to cast magic.

However, it was a completely different story when it came to mythical beasts. With their high level of intelligence, they were able to manipulate magic while fully understanding the techniques behind it. It was precisely because they were able to use magic according to the situation that they were considered far stronger and more dangerous than normal magical beasts and were feared by others.

“Accompany me, and let my roar resound over the weak. 〈〈Wolf’s roar〉〉”

This specialty magic of wolf-type magical beasts was feared even by adventurers, and it fanned up the innate terror their opponents held towards such carnivores. When one lost their calm and fell into a panic, they made for perfect prey.

It could be resisted with a strong will, but that was difficult to pull off when it came to a surprise attack like this.

The powerful roar shook the very earth and stopped the massive beast that boasted the greatest physical strength in this land dead in its tracks. The father wolf then sunk his fangs into the defenseless creature’s windpipe. Despite the wolf’s strong jaw and razor-sharp fangs, the beast didn’t go down so easily, as it was protected by thick fat under its skin. Despite being unable to move its body as it wished, the massive boar flailed about desperately, trying to force the father wolf off of it. But thanks to his fangs being buried so firmly, he wasn’t shaken off so easily.

As its last desperate act, the boar tried to use the weight of its massive body to flatten its foe, but the father wolf calmly leaped away and dodged the attack with a single flap of his wings. Having put itself into such a disadvantageous stance, the boar-type magical beast was no longer able to fend off the father wolf’s follow-up attack.

“To have come of age means being able to easily carry out a hunt like this. Do you understand, my child?” boasted the wolf, showing off the fruits of his hunt to his cub.

“Hmph,” responded the cub with a sound of dissatisfaction, knowing that his own fangs and claws could never strike a decisive blow against such a massive beast.

The cub kept pouting the whole time he dangled from his father’s jaw on the way back.

By the way, for soaring wolves, when it came to such massive boar-type magical beasts, the real issue was getting the body back to the settlement, rather

than difficulty of the hunt, but he didn't tell that to his cub right then. All the wolves in the settlement would gather and use wind magic to carve up the body and then dig into the delicious meat, which could turn a bit chaotic.

A mere half a year passed after that.

"Got it!" the cub cried out in victory, his tiny limbs straddling the massive trophy of his hunt.

"Wendelgard..."

"What is it?"

The father wolf, leader of the soaring wolves, stared at his friend and old acquaintance, a female human who led the village with which his people had long since had a pact.

They maintained a friendship that had nothing to do with the pact itself. As a human with a sense of values that exceeded that of her kind, she was quite amusing to him. And while the soaring wolves of the settlement had thought of the humans as weak, pathetic beings not worthy of continuing to maintain a pact with, Wendelgard alone had cleared away those doubts. When she was young, she had made half of the male wolves in the settlement tuck their tails between their legs with her fists alone.

Her male human mate who had accompanied her at the time had said, "No, no, Wendelgard is a special case, and normal folks can't do that," yet that man was powerful enough to face off against the soaring wolf pack leader and have his strength recognized.

Wendelgard had casually sipped away at the bottle of alcohol she had by her side as she accompanied the wolf to watch over the cub's attempt at his challenge today.

"That is your doing, is it not?"

"It was amusing, right?"

As she gave a relaxed, hearty laugh, she looked over at the cub's prey, which had fallen into a pit even larger than the beast itself. He had handled it almost *too* smoothly.

The cub had used his Wind magic to toss a stone at the boar-type magical beast to attract its attention, then sprung out himself and lured the creature where he wanted. He drew it near until the last possible moment, then fled into the sky with a flap of his wings. In the next instant, the ground beneath the magical beast collapsed. It was cleverly hidden, not unnatural-looking in the least. In all likelihood, magic had been used to carve out a hollow space, leaving a portion of earth on top. It was a trap that used the very weight of the magical beast itself.

The cub had then cut numerous ropes he had set up using Wind magic. Simple arrows made of stakes with sharpened tips rained down into the hole. They easily penetrated the thick skin of the beast, which the cub's own fangs could never pierce. It was a siege-scale assault.

Finally, with a flutter of his wings, the cub had landed on top of his prey and announced his victory.

Though the father wolf stared with a scornful gaze, Wendelgard didn't flinch.

"Accurately grasping one's own power and seeking the aid of those around you is also a form of strength. You should use everything you can. Using that principle to its fullest is most satisfactory, wouldn't you say?"

"Hmm..."

"This is your loss, as you said he needed to successfully hunt on his own, but you didn't specify the methods he could use. It'll be interesting to see how his future unfolds, right?"

"Ugh..."

As the one who had set the conditions, even though he may not have been fully satisfied, he still couldn't deny the cub's accomplishment. This was something entirely unprecedented in the long history of soaring wolves.

Well, having such an unusual neighbor was also unprecedented.

"And also," she started, going for the finishing blow. "When that cub comes back home, he might bring Latina back with him."

The leader of the soaring wolves absentmindedly started wagging his grey tail.

An awkward silence filled the air as Wendelgard sipped away at her bottle. As the father wolf sat deep in thought, his tail wagged happily away all the while thanks to what he was imagining.

"W-Will she come...?"

"Don't you think she will? My idiot grandson is always busy, so he doesn't have the time, but as long as Latina has an escort, she should be plenty capable of doing so."

"H-Hmm..."

"If she brushes your cub every day, then her skills will surely improve..."

If her godly, blissful skills were to reach even higher heights, just what would that be like?

His tail happily wagged away, indicating the decision he'd already clearly reached.

As Wendelgard watched her friend in amusement, she brought her bottle to

her mouth once again.

The soaring wolf cub descended from the tree, which offered the best view of all in the settlement and was popular amongst the cubs. It wasn't very difficult for him to do it with a few leaps from branch to branch, as he was the most skilled at flying amongst the cubs his age.

He pointed the tip of his nose into the air and started to sniff. He kept at it, sniffing a number of times. His nose centered in on the northwest, the direction Latina herself had once pointed out. Soon, his ears shot straight up.

"There!"

Though it was only faint, being carried on the wind from far away, there was no mistaking that pleasant smell.

"Latina's place, go!"

He spread his wings out wide and, with the wind surrounding him, he danced through the air. By skillfully using the air currents, he flew a large circle about the settlement and then started off towards his destination.

He arrived in Kreuz and caused something of a disturbance a mere two days later.

Afterword

“I’ve heard some of the ol’ festival music, so I’ll just have a beer and head on home.” Back in the day, I never imagined I’d become such a useless adult who’d have such pathetic thoughts... Well, for whatever reason, I can’t quite state that definitively.

For most of you, this is probably our first time meeting. I’m CHIROLU, and I’d like to sincerely thank you for picking up this work, the third volume of *If It’s for My Daughter, I’d Even Defeat a Demon Lord*.

I currently live in a certain part of the Kanto region, but I was born and raised in the Shitamachi area. As I’ve grown up, I’ve come to realize that my common sense may differ from that of the world at large, but Shitamachi was an area that was always holding some festival or event. It was only natural to expect to see festival carts set up for two months straight. I recall having conversations with my friends when we were young, full of statements like, “This week, we’ll go to the festival at our shrine, and then next week, we’ll go to the festival they’re having over at that shrine.”

My memories of living there are too strong, so when I think of festivals, I remember those events happening at the start of summer, but conventionally, it may be more common to think of them as occurring in the fall. When writing this volume, I unthinkingly took it as a given that the festival would be at the start of summer. My editor pointed this out to me, but when I saw how I had written that without even thinking about it, it made me realize just how deeply ingrained such “common sense” could become.

I’ve become accustomed to not just walking about and eating from the stalls, but also taking in the festival music and lively atmosphere while taking a groggy stroll. I’ve come to mistakenly feel like if I don’t go to seasonal events like the *Tori-no-Ichi* festival, winter will never come. I enter into the start of summer in a similar mental state, so it’s become an unskippable annual event for me to sit down with a pack of *takoyaki* and a can of chuuhai in one hand. Even if *takoyaki’s* just made with a bit of red pickled ginger and some flour, I feel like there’s just something to it that you can’t get from a specialty shop. I got ready to argue when I saw a place that claimed to put a full octopus in each one, but when

I saw that it was a baby octopus, I burst out laughing and was satisfied. However, I remember feeling disappointed that it was hard to eat.

Such carts also chase after fads, so when there was a pancake boom, for example, plenty of carts serving them popped up. They disappeared before long, though. I enjoy walking along and looking for such differences. In the last few years, I get the feeling that the number of carts serving ethnic dishes has been on the rise. I even saw a *pho* cart with a huge line in front of it when it got cold. Such things can be hit or miss, but it was doing better than I would have expected.

And then there's *poppo-yaki*, which isn't actually squid. [ED: In most of Japan, *poppo-yaki* refers to grilled squid.] It's a staple of the carts in the Kaetsu region of Niigata. I've heard even people from other parts of Niigata say they've never heard of it, so it's apparently limited to being quite a small local snack. Even if you ask what sort of food it is, it's rather hard to describe. It's light brown, has a brown sugar flavor to it, and has more of a springy texture to it rather than being fluffy. When I attended an event in Kaetsu, it left quite an impact on me to see five carts in a row, with three of them serving *poppo-yaki*. Just how beloved was it for over half of them to be serving it?

This is straying from the topic of festivals, but as I mentioned in the afterword for the last volume, my family outings always took the form of strolls through picturesque scenery. Being able to eat while walking around such places was something I got to enjoy that you generally can't do in your everyday life. In fact, before my siblings learned how to eat fish with chopsticks, they learned how to eat grilled sweetfish on a skewer without dropping it. Having seen children manage such a thing, I can't help but tilt my head at the rising trend of people who dislike fish because of the bones.

My parents were the complete opposite of those folks who decide they don't like a food without even trying it, and they always tended to take the initiative when it came to chowing down on dishes they'd never seen before. I get the feeling that that may have been a big part of what made walking about and eating at our travel destinations so much fun. When my family all went to a buffet-style restaurant the other day and I saw that we all had palm sprouts on our plates, I realized that my parents' teachings had been passed down. Let me just note that the texture was like that of bamboo shoots.

Even though the titular daughter wasn't supposed to be a gourmand, she ended up eating anything and everything without me even thinking about it, so perhaps the problem is with me.

Even so, I’d be glad if my story was able to get across some of those special events from my childhood and how they excited me.

Thank you so much to everyone who helped make this book a reality. Thank you for always putting up with my strange hang-ups and for drawing an adorable “daughter,” Kei. And more than anything else, to those of you who chose this book out of so many options, you have my deepest gratitude.

As long as this book brought you at least a little joy, then I’ll feel truly blessed.

February 2016,
CHIROLU

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If It’s for My Daughter, I’d Even Defeat a Demon Lord: Volume 3
by CHIROLU

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